

**Gospel With The Cross**

*February 25, 2007*

(Lent 1 - Year C)

Luke 4: 1-13

*St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas*

The Holy Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness, where he was hungry. And, for 40 days, he was tempted by the devil.

Jesus was tempted by the devil, as the devil said to him:

“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

But, Jesus did not give in to this temptation, either.

Then, in an instant, the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and said:

“If you will worship me, it will all be yours.”

But, Jesus did not give in to this temptation.

Then, the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, and placed him at the very top of the Temple, and said to him:

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.”

But, Jesus did not give in to this temptation.

Three different temptations are presented to Jesus:

A temptation to gain social power, by ending hunger.

A temptation to gain political power, by ruling all kingdoms.

A temptation to gain religious power, by the protection of angels.

But, Jesus does not give in to any temptations for power.

Because, Jesus knows that true power comes only by walking a downward path to the Cross.

Last Friday night, I was at a dinner party in Houston.

Actually, it was a dinner party in honor of my brother's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

After a while, the dinner table discussion turned to religion.

We began to talk about Joel Osteen, the pastor of Lakewood Church in

Houston.

Joel Osteen's ministry has had a big impact in Houston, as well as a big impact nationally and internationally, because his books are best-sellers and his sermons are now broadcast around the world.

Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church now worships in the same arena where the Houston Rockets used to play basketball.

It is not unusual for the Lakewood Church to draw crowds of up to 20,000 on a Sunday.

At our dinner table last Friday night, someone asked me:

"Jeff, what do *you* think is so attractive about Joel Osteen's message?"

And, I replied:

"Joel Osteen's message is attractive because it is the Gospel, without the Cross.

It is carefully-packaged, feel-good, motivational material that tells to live our best life now, to conquer the world, to have faith in the power of positive thinking, to move upward and onward."

But, if you notice carefully, with Joel Osteen, there is little mention of the Cross.

There is little mention of suffering or loss or the refusal to accept power. It is Gospel, good news, without the Cross.

And, what is attractive about Joel Osteen's message is the same thing that was attractive about the devil's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness:

The attractive promise of power and upward mobility, *without* having to walk the way of the Cross.

I believe that we minimize the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness if we make Jesus' temptations into just a lesson about how *we* are supposed to resist *our own* temptations.

Jesus did not resist the temptations of the devil so that we could "just say no" to the desserts that we give up for Lent.

Jesus' resistance to temptations of power should not be boiled down to:

“Well, if Jesus could be hungry for 40 days, then I can certainly say no to a Thin Mint Girl Scout cookie.”

No.

Jesus’ resistance to temptations of power show us more than his personal willpower.

Jesus resists the temptations of the devil to show us the way of the Cross.

Because, think of it this way:

What if Jesus had given into the devil on all those temptations?

What if Jesus had said?:

“Hey, I *am* hungry and I *am* the Son of God.

I *am* going to turn all these stones into loaves of bread.”

Then, how would we ever know the way of the Cross, the way of suffering, if Jesus always had a full belly?

What if Jesus had said?:

“Hey, I *am* the king of the world.

I am going to be the *boss* over everybody.”

Then, how would we ever know the way of the Cross, the way of service to others, if Jesus never stooped to wash feet?

What if Jesus had said?:

“Hey, I *am* the Son of God.

So, I’ll jump off the top of the Temple and fly on down.”

Then, how would we ever know the way of the Cross, the way of humility, if Jesus was flying around with angels?

The temptations of Jesus don’t just give us an example of how we are to give up chocolate for Lent.

The temptations of Jesus give us an example of how we are to walk the way of the Cross.

And, the way of the Cross is the way of suffering and service to others and humility and rejection and powerlessness.

You might have noticed that I have a few, different crosses that I wear on Sunday mornings during worship.

During Lent, I like to wear this cross.

This cross is not made of polished silver, on a shiny, silver chain.

This cross has the crucified Jesus on it, on a simple, black cord.

I bought this cross in La Paz, Bolivia, from a tiny, little woman, a beggar, on the town square in front of the Roman Catholic Cathedral.

This woman sells trinkets and lives on the streets of La Paz.

If any of you have been to an extremely impoverished country, like Bolivia, then you have an image of the extreme way of the Cross, the way of suffering and powerlessness.

And, this cross reminds me of that Bolivian peasant woman, whom I believe is a *holy* woman, because she walks the way of the Cross.

And, *we* are holy men and women, when *we* embrace the way of the Cross, when we resist the temptations of social, worldly and religious power.

We are holy men and women when we embrace the downward mobility of suffering and service and humility and rejection and powerlessness.

For, the Christian faith is a paradox:

The Son of God, Jesus, resists all the devil's temptations of power.

And, yet, Jesus is the most powerful man ever.

The Christian faith is a paradox:

When we resist temptations that tell us to have faith in the power of positive thinking, to conquer the world, to move upward and onward,

Then, we will walk the way of the Cross all the way down,

Down into the darkness of the Tomb... and into the light of the third day.

The Christian faith is a paradox:

For, as St. Francis of Assisi, the champion of the animals and the poor, once prayed:

“It is in giving that we receive;  
It is in forgiving that we forgiven;  
And, it is in *dying* that we are born to eternal life.”

And that, my friends, *is* good news:  
Gospel, *with* the Cross.

AMEN.

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