

READING FROM THE GOSPELS: Luke 4:1-13

The Bread of Life

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Her name was Aunt Ida. She and her husband, Fernie, lived in a simple home in rural South Carolina. Aunt Ida was ... now how can I say this ... Let's just say she was well nourished. She loved to cook ... but not just cook ... I mean COOK! You'd better be hungry when you sat down at her kitchen table, because there was always a feast set before your eyes.

My sister, my two cousins and I used to love to eat over at Aunt Ida's house. Not so much for all the food, but to watch the culinary exhibition Aunt Ida would put on in front of our eyes. We would tease her as she cooked there on that old gas range ... "You sure you have enough corn in that pot?" "Maybe you should throw another roast in the oven." "I'm not so sure about those mashed potatoes ... maybe we ought to mash another bag of 'em."

We were just kidding ... but I'm not so sure she took it as teasing ... because I think she seriously considered doing exactly what we suggested. We four cousins would spend the entire morning roaming the farmland and the woods and by the time lunch time came, we really were hungry ... famished. So by the time we sat down around that old yellow top table ... we were rewarded with Aunt Ida's gastronomic expertise ... food, food and more food.

There would be fried chicken, beef stew over rice, three types of beans and peas, stewed tomatoes, corn on the cob and creamed corn, biscuits, rolls and cornbread, mashed potatoes covered in a thick brown gravy ... I won't even go into the dessert list. And throughout the meal, I can still hear Aunt Ida's cry that is still repeated to this day at the Hagood dinner table. . . "Eat now, eat. Eat now, eat." If there was a hole in our bellies before lunch ... it was filled beyond filling by the time we slowly crawled away from that table.

Whenever I read our gospel lesson today, about Jesus fasting for 40 days in the wilderness, I picture Aunt Ida's kitchen waiting for him at the end of those long days. He would have enjoyed that meal.

But Jesus was sustained during his 40 days of fasting by a food that more than filled the emptiness he carried within his stomach. And it is a food that can sustain you during those times of your life when you, too, walk through the wilderness ... and a gnawing emptiness growls deep within you ... waiting to be filled by something ...

Listen with me to the word of our Lord from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 1-13. I will be reading from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*.

1 Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wild.

2 For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up he was hungry.

3 The Devil, playing on his hunger, gave the first test: "Since you're God's Son, command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread."

4 Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to really live."

5 For the second test he led him up and spread out all the kingdoms of the earth on display at once.

6 Then the Devil said, "They're yours in all their splendor to serve your pleasure. I'm in charge of them all and can turn them over to whomever I wish.

7 Worship me and they're yours, the whole works."

8 Jesus refused, again backing his refusal with Deuteronomy: "Worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness."

9 For the third test the Devil took him to Jerusalem and put him on top of the Temple. He said, "If you are God's Son, jump.

10 It's written, isn't it, that 'he has placed you in the care of angels to protect you;

11 they will catch you; you won't so much as stub your toe on a stone'?"

12 "Yes," said Jesus, "and it's also written, 'Don't you dare tempt the Lord your God.'"

13 That completed the testing. The Devil retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever been really hungry for something ... and I'm not just talking about food ... have you ever been so hungry for something to fill an emptiness in your life ... a special need ... a desire for something ... so hungry for it that you could actually taste it, smell it ... hold it in your hands?

Jesus was hungry ... as hungry as any human being ... he was starved. And there in the middle of a desert wasteland ... fasting for 40 days ... the hunger in his belly ... and the hunger in his heart and soul ... leave him vulnerable to the power of temptation ... to the power of evil. He can make a choice ... does he continue his mission here in this world and remain faithful to God the Father ... or does he succumb to the darkness placed before him by the tempter ... the devil ... Satan ... Lucifer ... the fallen angel who will stop at nothing to prevent Jesus from fulfilling his work in the world.

Now we don't like to mention words like "The Devil" ... or "Satan" ... we're way too enlightened to speak about those kinds of fairy tales. We prefer to diagnose evil in the world ... our sinful nature ... as something psychologically wrong that can be treated with a pill and a little counseling.

But I want to make something very clear ... evil is a real force in this world. It is a force ... and whether we give it an ancient name or modern one ... we, just like Jesus was, are subjected to it day in and day out ... throughout our lives. And Jesus, there in the wilderness, was tempted.

His first temptation could have been a knock out blow. He was starving ... and the Devil puts the idea into his head that Jesus can turn rocks into bread. I can hear that devil holding up a rock to Jesus and commanding him, "Eat now, eat. Eat now eat!" There is a deep hole in pit of Jesus' stomach ... and that bread would certainly fill it ... but at what price would it fill him?

Unless you're planning on fasting during this season of Lent ... like our youth will be doing very soon ... I don't think you can really grasp what it means to hunger for food. Oh, sure, your stomach might be growling a little bit right now because we're all waiting for the worship service to end so we can get over to the potluck meal. But we are a people with plenty ... we don't miss a meal unless we want to.

Yet ... each of us is still famished ... each of us has a strong need for something. And the Devil is quite aware that when we are hungry enough for something ... when there is an empty space gnawing deep in our guts ... a hole in our lives that needs to be filled ... we are vulnerable to sin.

All kinds of things can happen in our lives to create a hole to be filled ... something may have happened in your childhood ... maybe you're living an unfulfilled life where you feel undervalued or unappreciated ... maybe your spouse has been drifting away and you feel lonely and you desire companionship ... maybe there are strong desires within you that tempt you ... pulling you toward pornography or an illicit affair ... maybe you're faced with peer pressure at school that just seems to overwhelm you and you don't want to be considered "uncool" ... after all ... everybody else is doing it.

And these life pressures ... these temptations ... these stresses on our lives ... leave a darkness ... an emptiness within us ... and we look for so many ways to fill it ... with alcohol ... drugs ... sex ... gambling ... gluttony ... buying frenzies ... all kinds of ways to just fill up that gnawing in your gut. And eventually it gets out of control ... and all you want is more ... as that old tempter keeps on yelling in your ear ... "Eat now eat!, Eat now eat!"

Yet Christ tells the devil ... "It takes more than bread to really live." And it truly does. Because the things of this world will never fill that emptiness in your life ... but the Bread of Life ... the living word of God can help you to fill that emptiness.

And Christ is offering it to you this day. Now there's no doubt about it ... living in this world is not easy ... some of us are so wrapped up in stress and anxiety that it's hard to see straight ... some of us are carrying some pretty heavy burdens ... and it's so easy to just reach for the bottle or the pill or the affair to satisfy your life ... instead of doing the hard work Christ calls us to do

... to take the Lord's hand and begin to turn your life around. I'm not talking about pie in the sky ... I'm talking about your Savior who's been there ... and who is there for you now.

That's not the only temptation Christ confronted there in the wilderness. He was also offered every kingdom in the world ... all the power he could ever dream of ... if he would just worship the Devil. Now that might seem a bit far-fetched for us to comprehend.

About the closest we'll ever come to ruling the world is if we win the board game *Risk*. We would rather point our fingers at those who hunger for greed and power ... the Wall Street brokers ... or the big bank presidents ... or the Bernie Madoff's of this land and blast them for their unbridled self-indulgence that hurt so many people. But greed and power are real temptations in this world ... and they don't just happen to the kings, prime ministers and presidents.

Power and greed can affect your family ... it can affect your life at school ... or at work ... it can affect every relationship that you value in your life. Climbing the corporate ladder at the expense of someone else ... climbing over someone else's back just to get to the next rung ... can create a poisonous work environment that hurts many people ... and when your own need for power or greed becomes more like the reality TV show, *Survivor*, in which you will say and do anything to be the top dog ... then your life is no different than those whose lives were consumed on Wall Street.

When your marriage or any relationship becomes one sided ... when one partner holds power over the other ... when the concerns or feelings or needs of a wife or a husband are ignored ... or even worse, when someone is made to feel unworthy or less than ... darkness will surround that relationship.

Peer pressure can bring sin and darkness into your life. When you're at school ... and you're so worried about being seen with just the right people ... at the expense of someone else's feelings ... some terrible things can happen. Young teenagers have committed suicide because of unfeeling and uncaring bullying ... be it physical violence or emotional trauma broadcast over the internet ... And the Devil just cries out louder ... "Eat now eat! Eat now eat!"

Yet Christ ... tempted in the wilderness just as we are ... responds with the words ... "Worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness." How we live our lives in relationship to others ... must be measured by those holy words ... every day of our lives.

As Christ will later teach ... "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself." Sounds simple ... but when you're hungry for money ... or power in your relationships ... Or even the right high school clique ... the tempter is there to tempt.

The last temptation Christ encounters in the wilderness is probably the hardest for us to face ... at least for me it is. The devil takes Christ to the top of the temple and tells him to jump off ... and tells him to let the angels catch him. Isn't that like a miracle? If he falls ... he will be miraculously saved. But Jesus replies, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Have you ever hungered for a miracle? Many of us have ... and frankly, our prayers for such a divine intervention, often seem to go unanswered. Why did that person live and yet, this person did not? Why do bad things seem to always happen to good people? Why are some people cured but others die. As someone reminded to me this week ... there is an old expression ... “But for the grace of God go I.” However ... if that’s true ... then why was God’s grace withheld from that other person? Did they do something wrong? Is God punishing them?

No ... I don’t believe that ... Even as hard as it is for me sometimes to accept it. God does not will pain and suffering. Let me repeat that ... God does not will pain and suffering. But God does understand ... very intimately ... what pain and suffering is all about ... even to the point of dying on a cross. The full humanity of Christ ... God the person who walked in this world ... experienced everything we can ever experience. Christ knows and empathizes with us when we, too, face unbearable pain and suffering in this world.

As Rabbi Harold Kushner writes, "God's promise was never that life would be fair. God's promise was, when it's your turn to confront the unfairness of life, no matter how hard it is, you'll be able to handle it, because He'll be on your side. He will give you the strength you need to find your way through." (Rabbi Harold Kushner November 26, 2004, Religion and Ethics)

You see ... there is a price we all pay for the free will we were all granted from the dawn of humanity. And bad things do happen to good people. But Christ has already paid the ultimate price by choosing to walk to the cross for us.

It is that journey that we remember and walk together during this season of Lent. Quite simply ... there in the wilderness ... Jesus faced every temptation we will ever face in this world ... and he did not succumb to the Devil. We, however, will fail ... we will fail again and again. But that should not leave us feeling helpless ... without hope ... because that is why Christ came into this world.

It is Christ who saves us from our sins ... who fills our hearts and minds with the knowledge and love of God ... who keeps calling us back to him again and again ... who never abandons us to the darkness in this world ... to the work of the devil who is there working hard to break your relationship with the Savior ...

This past Ash Wednesday ... as the ash was smudged across our foreheads in the sign of the cross ... we celebrated for what is yet to be, regardless of our lives as “dirty rotten sinners” ... for it is in Christ that we are forgiven ... that we are healed ... that we are made whole ... that we are claimed and reclaimed by the God who first claimed us at the waters of our baptism.

So the next time you hear that ol’ devil calling out to you ... “Eat now, Eat!” ... just tell him ... Yes ... I will eat ... I will eat of the Bread of Life offered by Jesus Christ. I will fill myself with intimate and honest conversation with my Savior ... I will live into his welcoming presence ... his grace ... and his love ... today and forevermore.

Let us pray:

When we face temptation's power,
Lonely, struggling, filled with dread,
Christ, who knew the tempter's hour,
Come and be our living bread.
By your grace, protect, preserve us,
Lest we fall, your trust betray.
Yours, above all other voices,
Be the Word we hear, obey.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**