

## **WHEN THE DEVIL HAD FINISHED EVERY TEST**

First Sunday in Lent

March 9, 2025

Jesus spent forty days of prayer and fasting in the Wilderness of Judea before being tempted by the devil. Forty days of solitude and reflection and self-examination. Last Wednesday, in Ash Wednesday's liturgy, the invitation was given to all who were gathered, to prepare for a holy Lent. The invitation reads: "I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word." The call to us on Ash Wednesday was the call to Jesus in the Wilderness those many years ago.

It was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness, because God knew that Jesus needed a further and deeper time of inner work; of self-examination, self-denial, reflection, stripping-away, and penitence. These forty days of solitude were necessary for him to deepen his intimacy with the Father, and to complete the preparation needed to be ready for the hard years of work and ministry that was to come.

And if Jesus needed this time of preparation and inner work, we need it even more so. Each of us is called annually, during Lent, to a season of inner work. We need Lent as a special time for prayer and fasting and self-examination and repentance. Oh, it will never be as deliberate and intense as when Jesus went through, but we need it to deepen our intimacy with God and to continue to deal with the demons of our false self and human ego; our pride and control issues; to face our shadow self. You and I need

Lent to prepare us for the work and ministry God has assigned each of us as disciples of Christ to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world that God has called us to be.

God often tries and forms and refines and tempers us, purifies us and hardens us and develops us as fully alive and whole human beings. God does this through prayer and self-examination and meditating on scripture and through the many ups and downs; the highs and lows in life that we experience socially, professionally, in our families, and in our church community.

I like the imagery in the word “tempering.” We often think of the process of tempering steel. Tempering increases the hardness and elasticity of steel or other metals by reheating it and then cooling it, through extreme heat and extreme cold, polar opposites. In a similar way, our lives must be tempered through both accolades and animosity; the heartaches and struggles of life as well as the times of great success. All of these were necessary for Jesus’ life as it is for ours, to harden us all in the faith and make us flexible for the work God calls us to do.

The scriptures speak often of this refining and tempering time. The Psalmist writes: “You have tested us, O God; you have purified us like silver.” God spoke to Zechariah: “I will bring that group through the fire and make them pure. I will refine them like silver and purify them like gold.” In Isaiah we read: “I have refined you, but not as silver is refined. Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of suffering.” All humanity is tried and tested and refined and tempered, even Jesus of Nazareth the incarnate Son of God.

We often think of testing and trying coming through the experience of hard times and the low points in life. But it also comes through those times of success when we are rewarded and praised. We see this in today's gospel reading.

On that day, Jesus went immediately from the temptation of the highest of highs in life, to the temptation of some of the deepest lows. He had arrived at the Jordan River to observe John baptizing the masses of people. When his time in line finally came, he stepped into the water and approached the baptizer. After being immersed, his body was raised soaking wet from the water's tomb. We are told that the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended upon him and the Father spoke: "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy." God in that miraculous moment placed his blessing and anointing on Jesus as he was preparing to set out on his ministry.

I believe that that moment was a dangerous and vulnerable time for Jesus. Place yourself in his sandals. There you are, rising out of the waters of baptism. As you brush away the water from your eyes you see all the people around you, looking at you in awe. Then the Holy Spirit descends on you in the form of a dove, baptizing you yet again, this time in the Holy Spirit. Then God says to you: "This is my dearly loved child, who brings me great joy."

Man, it doesn't get any better than that! It would be very tempting for anyone, as it must have been for Jesus, to experience all that, and to think; man, I am hot stuff! Yes, bring it on! I'm ready for anything! Let's get this ministry started! But I believe that very moment may have been one of

Jesus' most vulnerable moments of temptation. A time when he may have been tempted to believe that he was ready to face anything that was to come. But Jesus passed this test. He did not head out right away into ministry, possibly in his own strength. Just like the process of tempering steel requires both heat and cold, Jesus would need the second tempering process still to come, before he would be ready to begin his ministry.

Today's gospel begins with these words: "Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River." He returned on an amazing high. But then we are told that the Holy Spirit led Jesus, not to his first opportunity to minister to others, but to a solitary time alone in the wilderness for the final tempering process.

It would be there in the Wilderness that after having experienced the trials and refining of the highest highs, that he would have to experience the trials and refining and tempering of the deepest lows. There in the Wilderness, without any food or water, Jesus began to fast and to pray. Those forty days were a time of inner cleansing and spiritual strengthening, preparing him for the final testing and tempering that was about to come.

At the end of the forty days, Jesus was physically depleted and weak; he was parched and starved. In that condition, the devil wrongly thought that Jesus was at his most vulnerable, but in reality he was at his strongest place spiritually. The devil took that moment to strike. And so, the attacks came, three tests, one after the other.

The first test: In Jesus' physically depleted condition the devil attacked his body: "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become a loaf of bread." For the second test, the devil took Jesus to a high mountain where all the kingdoms of the world were laid out in view. The demon said: "I will give you the glory of these kingdoms and authority over them...because they are mine to give to anyone I please. I will give it all to you if you will worship me." Then the final test. Jesus was taken to the highest pinnacle of the temple and told: "If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He will order his angels to protect and guard you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone.'"

Jesus faced down each test. And each time he came out victorious, turning to the scriptures for a response: "People do not live by bread alone." "You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him." "You must not test the Lord your God." NOW, Jesus was ready to begin his ministry. He had been refined and tempered through facing praise and adoration, and in how he responded to assaults on his physical needs and his human ego. Jesus was now fully tempered. He was hardened to be able to face all that was to come.

The gospel ends with these words: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time." Other translations read; "the devil departed, biding his time," or, "he departed from him for a time." After Jesus completed this crucial time of refining and tempering, there would still be more tests and trials to come. This he knew. But the devil was patient, and would bide his time.

My dear brothers and sisters, hear again the words from the Ash Wednesday service as we begin this Lenten season of 2025: "I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word." God, and The Episcopal Church, is calling each of us, once again, to a season of self-evaluation and self-examination and repentance and prayer.

May God use this Lenten season in each of our lives to further refine us and temper us as we prepare for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Holy Saturday and Easter to come. And as we prepare for the work and ministry God has in store for each of us.