

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
First Sunday of Lent

10 March 2019

“When Vulnerable”

Hebrew Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Christian Scripture: Luke 4:1-13



Today, we set our clocks ahead an hour. Though I could use the extra hour of sleep, I am deeply grateful for gaining an extra hour of daylight. By setting our clocks ahead, we are lengthening our day on this, the first, Sunday of Lent.



How appropriate, for Lent is actually the Olde English word for ‘lengthening’ and thus a word for ‘Spring’.

Both our scripture readings also have much to do with time. Who thought of the number ‘forty’ in both our readings from Deuteronomy and Luke? Deuteronomy recounted how the Israelites were lost and vulnerable in the desert for forty years. And as we saw from the video

clip, Jesus prayed and contemplated for forty days to prepare for his ministry.



Rachel Evens wrote that “forty is a number that symbolizes a prolonged period of hardship, waiting, and wandering into the wild unknown”.



For forty days, Jesus experienced all that the Israelites did during their forty years. Not only is Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness a microcosm of the story of the Israelite people seeking to be faithful, but it is microcosm of our own lives too.



Remember in the beginning, in the midst of Jesus’ vocation as a carpenter, he questioned the purpose of his life. So, Jesus took leave, I guess, and got away to worship.



Jesus struggled with heat and cold. He experienced obstacles and struggles. Jesus experienced loneliness and fun.



Jesus admired the beauty of the earth and the majesty of the universe. Jesus contemplated his own mortality.



Jesus thirsted and drank. Jesus was hungry. He counted the days, some moving slowly and some quickly. He was caught in brambles.



Towards the end of his forty days, when Jesus was the most vulnerable, the serpent came to tempt him. I believe Jesus was tempted not to necessarily do anything bad, but simply to forget to whom he belonged and to forget God's purpose for him. That's it.

Jesus was tempted to forget that which was most important. But Satan had to wait to tempt Jesus until Jesus was even more vulnerable.

When are we most vulnerable to temptation? Perhaps when we are alone. Perhaps when we lack sleep. Perhaps when we lack food. Perhaps when we lack money. Perhaps when we lack friends. Many things make us vulnerable.

Satan tempted Jesus with things that are not in and of themselves bad.



Bread. No one would disagree that one needs to eat - and bread is pretty good and wholesome.



Miraculous powers such as those that Moses and God did during the Passover and the parting of the Red Sea - those are seen as good.



Or the overthrow of an oppressive Roman colonization and being the ruler of a just and free kingdom of God - that would be good. Bread,

preserving oneself, and political control - none of these things are bad in and of themselves. In fact all of these things are potentially very good.

Bread, miracles, and justice are not bad in and of themselves. Therefore, might I suggest that often it is not that with which we are being tempted that is bad but rather our motives?



One of many things of which I am most proud is my son who throughout his high school always receive the comment from his teachers: “He does the right thing because it is right”. We can often do right things for the wrong reasons. The Pharisees made a religion of doing the right things for the wrong reasons.

In our story of Jesus temptation, I believe Jesus was most vulnerable when he began thinking to live for himself and not others - his motives for doing what may be the right thing began to be influenced by self-promotion and self-interest.



Turning stones into bread, food for Jesus. Bungee jumping from the temple, safety for Jesus. Ruling over kingdoms, power for Jesus. What

makes us vulnerable to temptation? It is self-interest and self-promotion.



If you and I eat and are satisfied, it must be so that we can sustain ourselves to serve others. You see, Jesus could have done great and miraculous things like throw himself off the temple pinnacle only to be saved - but throughout his ministry Jesus kept most of his miracles secret or for a selective few.



To do publicity stunts such as the one Satan tempted Jesus to do would not have led people into a relationship with God based on love but rather on favors and magic tricks.



And finally, to rule over the kingdoms of the earth may be all well and good, but God wished the kingdom of God to be in people's hearts and thus freely chosen and sought and not imposed by an army or even divine degree.

Bread. Miracles. Power. Jesus was made vulnerable by temptations that were not necessarily bad if accepted, but to accept them for the wrong reasons was what Jesus resisted. Self-interest and self-promotion cannot be that which motivates us.

Jesus' resistance to temptation was extraordinary.



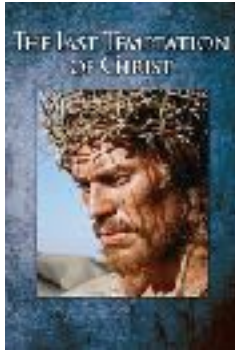
I am quite sure that if I had not eaten for forty days, I would have sliced that bread, asked for mayonnaise and mustard and put one of those chickens he was chasing, dead or alive, between the slices.

Despite how vulnerable Jesus was, he did not fall into temptation and do things for the wrong reasons. So, Satan departed and decided to wait for a more opportune time.

When did Satan feel it would be a more opportune time to tempt Jesus - when would he be most vulnerable?



Well, some say it was in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus asked God for the cup of suffering to be removed from him.



Others say Jesus' last temptation was before or during his execution, when Satan perhaps tempted him with a wife, children, a family and grandchildren - all things that in and of themselves are not bad. In fact they may be good. But if they are good for no one but himself, then all that is good may be sought out of selfish and greedy motivations. Jesus sought to do what was right for others, for all humankind and for all ages.



Let us, when we are most vulnerable, strive to do the right things because they are the right things to do. How do we judge if something is good and if it and not for purely personal and individual pleasure? Answer: To what degree does it benefit others?

This was the Word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, the people of God responded, "Amen!"