

## **Message for March 6, 2022**

### **Lent 1**

#### **Luke 4:1-13**

In one of his short stories, Oscar Wilde says that there was once a monk who lived by himself in the desert. He was a very good man and the fame of his holiness spread far and wide; many people even thought that he was a living saint. Some evil spirits then decided that it was their task to tempt him to do something wrong. First of all, the spirits offered him the forbidden fruit of fleshly lust, but the monk stood firm. Then they tried to sow the seeds of doubt and fear in his mind but that didn't work. After that, they tried to make him feel proud, but this didn't work either. With a mounting sense of desperation, the spirits then held him up to ridicule by saying that he was nothing more than a silly old fool to be spending all his time in the desert praying and fasting. The monk however just ignored them.

The spirits were at the point of giving up altogether when Satan himself showed up. The spirits told the devil about how their attempts to tempt the monk had failed. Satan's response was to say, "Your methods are too crude, permit me a moment". Very quietly Satan then tiptoed up to the saint and whispered in his ear: "Have you heard the good news? Your brother has just been made the Bishop of Alexandria!" Upon hearing this, a tidal wave of jealousy and resentment swept over the monk and his normally serene countenance gave way to a most hideous scowl of envy.

The point of this short story is simple enough and it is that no one is truly immune from temptation. Whether it be jealousy of another's success or whatever else, we all give in to temptation from time to time. Only one person has never done so, and that person is of course Jesus.

After he had been baptized, Jesus went to the wilderness for a period of time so that he might pray, fast, and prepare himself for his ministry. When he was finished, he was totally exhausted physically, mentally, and spiritually. It is no coincidence then that Satan chose this opportunity to tempt Jesus to do something wrong. Satan began by saying, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread". After all Jesus was hungry and besides, if he changed stones into bread, then he could feed all of the people all of the

time! His popularity would know no bounds, and everyone would know that he really was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God! All he had to do was compromise a little and then there would be no need to travel around the countryside preaching and teaching. There would certainly be no need for the cross either! Why not just take this short cut? Things would be so much easier! Jesus however refused.

This ploy having failed, the devil decided to try another tack. He took Jesus up to a high place and showed him all the kingdoms of the world. They could all be his said Satan; riches, power, and dominion. Once again there would be no need to endure the cross and the grave! There was of course one small catch; Jesus would have to compromise his principles just a little and worship him, but wouldn't it be worth it? Once again though Jesus held firm.

Despite having failed twice, the devil remained undaunted. He next took Jesus up to the very pinnacle of the Temple and urged him to jump off. Very cleverly Satan even quoted the scripture passage that said that no harm could come to the Son of God. If Jesus jumped off the angels themselves would catch him before he hit the ground and wouldn't that sight impress the crowds down below! They would be so impressed that they'd all have faith and believe! Once again there would be no need for Jesus to fulfill his ministry the hard way. Once again though Jesus held firm, and the testing came to it's close.

This then is the story of the temptation episode. There are many different aspects to today's scripture passage but as I thought about it, the thing that struck me the most about it was that there was no compromise! It must have been so tempting for Jesus just to have given in. Being human as he was, Jesus probably didn't want to wander around the countryside for three years with no place to call home. He most certainly didn't want to be arrested, scourged, and crucified. And to think that he could have been a success too without all of this if he was willing to compromise and bend his principles a little. It must have been so tempting for Jesus to have taken the attitude that the ends justify the means, but he didn't, and his refusal has left us with the example to follow.

A TV show that I often watch is "Chicago PD". For those of you who aren't familiar with it, it is a crime show that focuses on an elite police squad commanded by Detective Sergeant Hank Voight. Voight does not hesitate to bend the rules and even smash them if need be to get results. To him the ends

most certainly justify the means, and it is hard not to root for him. What does it matter if he plays fast and loose with the rules? At least the bad guys get their just rewards! When I think about it though, I wonder if Voight, ethically and morally, is really any different than the criminals he is out to catch?

Now this of course is an example from just one fictional TV show but think of how often the heroes in so many of the shows and movies that we watch flout the rules and buck the system, all in the name of a greater good. In fact such shows even touch on one of the great ethical issues of our time. Whether it be in policing, business, politics, or whatever else, many people today believe that the ends do justify the means no matter what. We can think of what is happening in Ukraine right now as an example. Putin firmly believes that Ukraine was, is and always should be a part of Russia and that that justifies the invasion. This is an extreme example but sadly almost anyone can try and justify anything by arguing that the ends justify the means.

Once we start doing this though we can find ourselves on a very slippery slope. We reason to ourselves that no real harm is being done but, if we aren't careful, one compromise leads to another which leads to another. Before we know it, we end up wondering how we got ourselves into such a mess in the first place. To use an analogy, compromising with sin is a little bit like ivy.

Like all plants, ivy has a small beginning when it starts its journey growing up a wall or a tree. It seems so harmless and even attractive but what happens? If it is climbing a tree, then it will eventually kill it by sucking the life out of it. If it is climbing up a wall, then it will slowly but surely destroy the wall by crumbling the bricks and mortar. I remember well, by way of example, the back wall of the garage of the manse. It was covered in ivy, and it looked so attractive. It was realized though that it was damaging the wall and should be removed. And sure enough, when the ivy was torn down the bricks were all scarred.

So it is with sin; once it gains a foothold in our lives, it can so easily become entrenched, take over, and do so much damage, scarring our lives, the lives of others, and that of the world around us. It can be very difficult but in the long run we are better off if we follow Christ's example and resist the temptation to compromise in the first place. Of course, it must also be admitted that despite all of our will power and all of our good intentions, we sometimes fail.

Sometimes we do end up compromising and that brings us to what these weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter are all about.

The good news and promise of Lent is that no matter what we may have said or done, and no matter how often we may have compromised with sin, all is not lost. It isn't simply because Christ died for us, Christ was raised for us, and even now Christ is praying for us. John Bakewell sums it up well in his hymn "Hail Thou one despised Jesus".

Jesus hail! Enthroned in glory  
there for ever to abide.  
All the heavenly host adore thee,  
seated at thy father's side.  
There for sinners thou art pleading,  
there thou dost our place prepare.  
Ever for us interceding,  
till in glory we appear.

The incredible and even mind-boggling redeeming love of God that will never let us go, is what Lent is all about. In the wonderful words of the medieval English poet William Langland; "All the sins of the world are but one burning coal in the sea of God's grace". And so they are.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Hear us we pray as we once again come to you, this first Sunday in Lent, the beginning of our journey to Good Friday and our most holy and triumphant day of all, Easter itself.

We thank you for what it is that we remember, celebrate, and affirm at this time of year; that while we are most certainly sinners, we are in fact forgiven sinners and that there is a world of difference between the two. We thank you for your Son's life, teaching and example. We thank you for his glorious resurrection as well, with all of it's glorious promises. Above all, today we thank you for your Son who, in the words of St. Peter: "Bore our sins on his body on

the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” We thank you for your promise that no matter what we have ever said or done, forgiveness is always ours for the asking. We pray this day for all who are haunted and weighed down by the sins of the past; grant them the peace of mind and soul that only you can.

We pray this day for the people of Ukraine, their well-being and safety. We pray for the million people who have fled their country and are now homeless. We pray for all of the mothers, wives and children who are fearing for the safety of their sons, husbands and fathers as the struggle continues. We pray for all in positions of authority, that you will grant them wisdom as to how to bring this war to a just end.

We pray this day for the sake of healing in the lives of all those who are ill, and for comfort for all those who mourn.

As the pandemic restrictions continue to be eased, we pray for all who do not perceive this as good news to be welcomed but rather the exact opposite, something that sparks unease, and even fear and dread. We pray as well for all the business owners and workers fearing for their livelihoods and hoping for an economic rebound after all of the restrictions of the past two years.

We ask these things in your Son’s name, he who knows full well from first hand experience just how good and challenging life can be. Amen