

Sermon
03-09-2025
Luke 4:1-13

The Theme for our Lenten Season at Ascension Parish is The Myth of Scarcity.
Our gospel reading today addresses The Scarcity of Courage
That is The scarcity of Courage in the face of Fear

The Temptation of Fear

In today's story, Jesus goes out in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. Jesus is hungry. The devil tempts him to make bread. Jesus is powerless in the heat and emptiness of the desert. He is alone, without community, and facing a great Adversary. The devil tempts him to join him; he will grant him power over all of the earth. He only has to worship that which is Evil and all will be his.

Then the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, and places him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, fly." Will not your angels save you, taunts the Devil?

But the bread, the power, and the flight away from misery are all an illusion. They are false images concocted by the devil to tempt Jesus away from God. They are temptations to find God unworthy, to find **God** feeble and unavailable to help Jesus to stand strong in the face of his Fear.

Many years ago, I was taking a flight out of Florida. It was hurricane season, and the weather was particularly turbulent all day. By the time night fell and my flight took off we were flying out in cloudy skies, howling winds, and a downpour. Flashes of lightning could be seen out the window. We continued to pitch and weave our way up the eastern seaboard. At about 30 minutes into the flight, the plane dropped what felt like about 1000 feet. I was terrified. I thought This is it. I'm done for. This is the way my life ends.

And then something came over me that changed the experience --and my life.

I decided that I did not want my last memory of myself to be that of a coward. I wanted the last bit of my life to be brave. It is so easy in times of extreme emotion to be tempted into Fear.

We are tempted to believe that there is a scarcity of courage that we can receive from God. We surmise that God is not big enough to pour out the courage we need or that we are too small a vessel to receive it.

In this moment of my great distress, I calmed myself by talking with God. Now I have talked to God all my life, from the time I was a little girl. But now I talked as if I were moments away from an in-person meeting with God. I told God I was okay with whatever circumstances took place. In that moment I made my peace with the living and the dying.

The weather and flight conditions did not improve greatly. The flight continued to be harrowing all the way to Dulles Airport in Washington DC. And as we bounced and bumped along, I thought about my life. I thought about the family I was born into, the choices I had made, and the mistakes and successes. I thought about what I had hoped to achieve and what had actually come to pass in my life. I thought about how and where God had seemed to be strong and present in my journey. And where only looking back now could I see where God had been present and moving in my life where I hadn't seen God before.

When I picture Jesus standing in the desert, or high above on a precipice of the temple I wonder if Jesus experienced this kaleidoscope imagery of his life and death. What was it that gave him the strength to reject the temptations of the devil? How was it that he as a person, so very very alone found courage in the face of Fear?

It is Fear that the devil was peddling that day. The message is clear, you are powerless to stand against the darkness of this world. It is I, the force of Darkness that is the purveyor of Strength.

But Jesus is no fool. He knows that darkness parades itself as a Pillar of strength. But the strength claimed by Darkness is propped up by ignorance and cowardice. It waves flags of victory through violence, untruths, and oppression. It is loud and flashy in its search for glory.

But in the end, darkness is no match for the Light. It is no match for the power of God's goodness and love.

While the darkness of this world burns hot, its flame cannot endure. Only the light of God and Love endures. And in God's love, we find courage. Courage to face our fear.

When my plane landed at Dulles Airport, people clapped in relief. It was one of those kinds of flights. The captain emerged from the cockpit and as we all filed past him, we thanked him. We thanked him for his competency and our safety. We were all so glad to be alive.

Certainly, I was grateful to have completed the flight safely. But it was what had transpired on that flight that was to influence the rest of my life. In my asking God to draw near, and through my willingness To trust God I was given the courage to face come what may.

Speaking "Not my will, but Thy will" in perhaps one of the most genuine moments of my life, helped me understand how courage is found by giving my will to God. Is this perhaps the most important choice we can make in our lives? To give up our willfulness and relinquish our choices to God?

There's a Lenten thought.

After all this back and forth of desert testing in which Jesus has reigned triumphant, he schools the Devil with one last pronouncement of Hebrew wisdom, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

This is ancient wisdom, saying "Do not doubt your God."

Through his ministry, Jesus encouraged his listeners to live their faith with sincerity and to trust God. In this there is strength.

Luke has the last words of today's passage. Luke tells his listeners,

"When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." This phrase gives me a chuckle and a sigh of sadness. It is honest. Darkness will return. It will find opportunities to invade our spirit. And we find ourselves fearful again. We will wonder if divine courage is enough.

Dear ones,

Lent is a time of wonder and reflection

It is a spirit-filled season in which we identify and sacrifice the Treasures that define our life choices.

With today's scriptures in mind might we examine that which we Fear and the Treasures by which we seek to keep those fears at bay? The Season of Lent offers us a time to let our treasures go and instead find our treasure in God.

In the days to come, may we draw near to God and listen with a receptive heart to the whisperings of this transformative season, so that we too might be changed.

Amen