

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ who says to us, ‘Return to the Lord, your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Amen.

I read an article a week or so ago in the March Living Lutheran entitled, *God’s Son Will Rise Again.* In it the author, Kimberly Knowle-Zeller, shares a story of her young son who woke very early one morning. Upon inquiring why he was awake so early, the boy’s response was, “The sun was taking so long to come up!” Before I even read further this one sentence resonated with me, especially as I looked toward Ash Wednesday and Lent. I could identify with this small boy who was just tired of waiting for the sun to come up. It feels like we have been waiting ‘for the sun to come up – for our days to be brighter and better. It does feel like we’ve been waiting forever for the pandemic to go away, like we have waited ever so long to be able to breath fresh air without our masks, to feel comfortable being out and about, for the cold and snow of winter to end! I suspect we could all make long lists. And now many of us are probably waiting, almost holding our breath for whatever the next shoe to fall is in the war that Russia is waging upon Ukraine. “What next?” I want to say.

What’s next? Lent is next – the time in the church year when we are called upon to turn our hearts again to God, and journey through these forty days with Jesus as he walks toward Jerusalem and Calvary. And it all begins today as we are led into the wilderness with Jesus where he is tempted by the devil. As we begin this journey it’s important to note one important thing – verse 1 of our gospel says, “*1Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.*” Prior to today’s lesson, Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan by John where the voice of God said, “*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.*” Jesus was fully human and Jesus’ baptism didn’t keep him from temptation any more than our own baptisms keep us from being tempted by the trappings of the world. But Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit and is LED by the Spirit into the wilderness. Jesus is not alone when he comes face to face with the devil.

Jesus faces three temptations in the wilderness. These temptations and Jesus’ responses can help us understand those things that tempt us and how with the help of the Holy Spirit we are equipped to face them. We are told Jesus eats nothing for forty days and is famished. The devil seeks to take advantage of this

potential weakness and tries to get Jesus to turn stones into bread so he can satisfy his hunger. It is a given that there certainly are those around us who are hungry and lack the economic needs to feed themselves and might be tempted to steal food. However, there are many other ‘hungers’ that we face even when we have sufficient food on our tables – hungers for all kinds of things that satisfy our immediate needs – whether physical, emotional, or social needs. A need to have the best gym membership so we are assured of the best physical fitness; the fanciest vehicle even if we can’t really afford it; in a need to calm our own fears, we may lash out at others in our effort to protect ourselves; we may be tempted to depend more on our own abilities in making decisions than to trust in God.

Jesus stood strong responding with scripture, *“One does not live by bread alone.”* His response comes from Deuteronomy 8:3 - *“He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”* Jesus turned to God to help him withstand the devil’s temptation. We too, need to turn to the Lord.

Next the devil takes Jesus to the top of the hill where he can see all the kingdoms of the world. He seeks to tempt Jesus with the powers and authorities of the world. There have been and continue to be leaders in the world who wield power and authority over other people, nations, and even creation; powers that are not rightfully theirs. Certainly, the current war Russia is waging is one example of this but there have been many since the beginning of creation and no nation is exempt. And this temptation and desire for power isn’t limited to nations, it can be wielded by individuals as well. Greed for land and other possessions, resources, prestige and power is a strong temptation. Again, Jesus looks to Old Testament scripture in his response to the devil, *“Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”* In his response Jesus turns to Deuteronomy 6:13 - *“The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.”* When we are tempted by power and authority do we ask ourselves, ‘What would Jesus do in this situation?’

The devil’s final attempt to get Jesus to do his bidding is in tempting Jesus to throw himself off the top of the temple. He tells Jesus that scripture says God will send his angels to protect him. The devil is tempting God in this last and

Jesus is ready with his response from Deuteronomy 6:16, “*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*” Do we ever tempt or try to bargain with God? I think back to times when Norm was ill and I was indeed tempted to want to bargain with God. Things like “*If you’ll just make him better, God, I promise we’ll never miss our daily devotions again,*” would run through my head. It also reminds me of times as a child when I would try to get my way by bargaining with my parents, “*If I can go to the movies with my friends, I promise I will do all my chores without being asked next week.*” Temptations can be big or small. Temptations are times when, rather than trusting in God to lead us in the right path, we attempt to take things into our own hands. We get impatient, tired of ‘waiting for the sun to come up.’ Jesus, famished from not eating may have also been tired of waiting, tired of dealing with the devil, and wanting to get on with his ministry. But Jesus trusted in God, and maybe reminded himself that the Spirit was with him. After this third temptation, finally the devil departs from Jesus, not forever, however. Note that the scripture says, “*he departed from him until an opportune time,*” indicating he would be back.

While we may be weary from all the world has thrown our way as we begin our Lenten journey, let’s consider what this fallow time of reflection and inward searching may provide for us. We all look expectantly toward the sun and green of spring, yet the winter’s snow and cold provide a rest period for nature – a time for trees to restore, a time for the nutrients in the snow to soak down into the soil ready to nourish our lawns in spring. Winter also provides a time for families to enjoy outdoor fun; to gather together to share popcorn around the fireplace or some other activity where they may listen to one another more closely. Similarly Lent can provide us a time to gather with fellow believers in more intentional Bible study; to take on a Lenten practice that serves our neighbors in a new way; to read a daily Bible passage with our children. It’s a time to look at our faith and our relationship with God. It’s also a time to look at the places in our lives where we may be tempted by worldly things even without realizing it.

Two different people shared ideas for Lenten practices with me during the past couple weeks. One was a chart with 40 squares and their suggestion was to do one of the suggested things each day and then cross it off. The suggestions in the boxes included things like, ‘be thankful,’ ‘say yes to something new,’ ‘take a walk,’ ‘slow down,’ ‘stop looking at your phone,’ ‘forgive someone,’ ‘forgive yourself,’ and ‘act justly.’ The second was titled, “Do You Want to Fast This Lent?” and

attributed to Pope Francis. A list of suggestions for ways one can fast, none of which would cost any money nor cause one to be hungry. I share it with you for consideration as you journey through Lent seeking to deepen your relationship with our Lord and Savior.

Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
Fast from worries and have trust in God.
Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

Yes, just as we are weary from the pandemic and wish for winter's cold to burst into sunny and warm spring, Lent may at times seem long and tiresome. However, journeying with Jesus through Lent is important for Christ shows us the way He would have us live our life. Lent is an opportunity to pause and look at our lives, to draw closer to Christ and to recommit to living according to the commandments God has provided as guidance for our lives, most importantly Jesus' commandments, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind;*" and the second, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" The young boy was right, sometimes it takes too long for the sun to come out. But the sun of Jesus Christ is realized in his sacrifice on the cross and the glorious resurrection three days later. It is worth the journey. Unlike the early disciples we know how the journey ends. There is no sun brighter than the Son of Man arising from the grave. Lent leads to Holy Week which ends with the resurrection – the Son indeed rises. It is surely worth the wait. Thanks be to God! Amen.