

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tested by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over he was famished. ³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’ ”

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸Jesus answered him, “It is written,
‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’ ”

⁹Then the devil led him to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

¹¹and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ” ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

There's a story I heard many years ago, and I was doubtful that I remembered it right, so I turned to my trusty historical fact-checker, Google, and sure enough, it was there. The internet never forgets anything.

So, the story goes, down in the south, Boston has quite the reputation of being a sports-loving, predominately Catholic town. Many of you grew up Catholic and many of you cheer for the Boston-based teams, so am I right about that? Is it just as true in Westerly as it is in Boston?

Well, Boston made the news down south because in 2004 Boston Red Sox fans were appealing to the Archbishop, one Sean Patrick O'Malley, a good Irish lad, for permission to eat ballpark hotdogs at the season opener at Fenway Park. They were appealing to him, because that year, the season opener happened to be on Good Friday, a day in Lent when Catholics are expected not just to abstain from red meat, but to fast. When he refused, they quoted precedent, reminding him that their previous leader, Cardinal Bernard Law, had given special dispensation in 1995 and 2000 to eat red meat on St. Patrick's day because it fell on a Friday in Lent during those years. Talk about temptations! How can you abstain from that delicious tube of mystery meat when tens of thousands of fans are wolfing them down all around you and all through the off season you've been dreaming of holding a ballpark hotdog again? Well, bad news is that the hot dog prices have gone from \$6.25 last year to nearly \$11 this year. May be that will help you resist the temptation. But still, how can you enjoy a ball game without a dog?

And twice recently, just last year in fact, Ash Wednesday, another day of expected fasting, was on Valentine's Day of all things and priests around the country were asked for permission by some and forgiveness after the fact by others so that they could have a Valentine's Day dinner. The church calendar and the cultural calendar can sometimes clash terribly!

Some of you have a lifetime of traditions about food regulations during Lent, whether you were Catholic or not. No red meat on Fridays, helping out with fish fries, giving up chocolate or caffeine. I heard someone last week say that their grandfather gave up

smoking every Lent. But always went back to smoking on Easter morning. I'm seeing lots of nodding heads as I'm talking. Does anyone want to share something you or a loved one has given up for Lent either this year or in the past?

Thank you! That's great. But I have to ask, were those massive sacrifices? Did you feel spiritually stronger after Lent was over just because you resisted those things for a little over a month? If so, that's wonderful, but I've personally discovered that when I give something up for Lent, I tend to find a substitute that I like equally well to satisfy me. I enjoy red meat, but I also really like fish and chips, so Fridays aren't that hard. I've given up chocolate in the past, but my ice cream consumption went way up as my chocolate consumption went down! When you can simply substitute one thing for another, the temptation is easily met. It's not a great sacrifice or hardship.

But Lent is not about agreeing to give up one food or vice. It's not about abstaining from something for 40 days just to return to the exact same habits once Easter morning dawns. It's about following Jesus' journey to the cross, learning from his choices. In Lent we commit to being in solidarity with Jesus – which implies both a pledge of emotional support and a change in our physical action or behavior.

If you're in solidarity with Ukraine, for example, you don't just pray for Ukraine, you support Ukrainian refugees, and non-profits there like World Central Kitchen, and you let your elected representatives know how you feel about the plight they are facing.

So during Lent, we're pledging our solidarity to Jesus. Not just praying more often but changing our behavior. I recently told Luke and Eli, two of our awesome children here at church, that, in my opinion, Jesus was the best person who ever lived, so each Sunday, it's my job to explain how Jesus lived so that we can try to copy him and what he did. Today, my job is easy because we have a simple parallel. Jesus spent forty days responding to temptations, and we have forty days of Lent to do the same.

We remember during Lent that he willingly chose to turn toward Jerusalem rather than shy away from it. We remember in our scripture for today that he had the opportunity to use his divine power to care for his physical body but chose to experience hunger, thirst,

and human weakness. We remember that he could have easily claimed political power, but he chose to humble himself. We remember that he chose a path of non-violence and self-sacrifice.

So instead of giving up something for forty days that we can easily find a substitute for, I want to challenge us to do something a little more self-reflective. Let's use these forty days in a way that reflects how Jesus used his forty days, because I believe Jesus used his time to truly determine how he was going to engage the world. In that time, at the beginning of his ministry, he decided what kind of Messiah he would be – how he would live and interact with people, what rules mattered, and what he would do when he had a chance to be an earthly ruler. He was given the chance to be self-sufficient, powerful, and immortal. It was offered to him, and he turned it down. He discerned a different way forward.

The question for us is, can we do something similar? Can we take forty days to answer those questions as individuals and as a church? Can we face our own temptations and tests about how we are going to live in this world? Are we going to be isolated or choose to be a vulnerable and active part of our own community? Which rules matter? How much power and independence will we claim for ourselves. How much wealth will we stockpile?

They're essentially the same temptations.

Lutheran pastor Megan Floyd writes, "We are far **more** vulnerable to being tempted by evil when we are weak and tired and hungry and alone and, maybe most of all *fearful*. . . Studies show that when people are under stressful conditions: like the anxiety of losing wealth or status, like illness, like worry over the decline of the middle class, like poverty, like fear of terrorism or war – people are less likely to love the stranger. In other words, when you and I are in the wilderness of perceived powerlessness – we adopt xenophobic tendencies to fear those different than us. We adopt tendencies to scapegoat, to blame, to become more tribalistic, and surround ourselves with people we perceive to share the same values and the same characteristics. So, it should come as no surprise that we are most apt to be tempted by power when we are feeling powerless. We are tempted to believe we can control terrorism and violence through religious persecution. We are

tempted to believe that our comfort level and safety is more secure if we move to a geographical place where there is little racial, ethnic and economic diversity. We are tempted to believe that we can control an insecure economy by hoarding our own wealth, and by excluding and demonizing various groups of people like immigrants, welfare recipients, or any considered “other.”

The fact of the matter is we are **less** likely to welcome the stranger when we are afraid. We are **most** vulnerable to being tempted by evil when we see the world in terms of **scarcity** rather than **abundance**; when we see people in the world as objects to be feared and despised rather than as **God’s own beloved**. And so, we exploit the worst stereotypes we can think of about each other, so that we can no longer **see** one another; so that we can no longer see **God** in one another. And yet, Jesus reminds us: “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only **him**.’” Which, as we know, means simply this: ***love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your soul, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.***”

And in case you were wondering, Reverend Megan wrote those words in 2019, not 2025, but they sure feel relevant today.

In the wilderness, Jesus was tired. He was hungry. He was physically weak, but he had two things going for him. He had just been baptized and the voice of God had said, “You are my Son, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” I imagine he already knew this, but it didn’t hurt one bit to hear it again. I imagine that his confidence in his identity gave him an inner strength and a peace that cast out any fear. And, also, he was not alone. He was “full of the Holy Spirit” when he was in the wilderness.

So if you’re feeling vulnerable to the temptations that Jesus faced - to isolate yourself from the rest of the world, to cut back on helping others, to grab up and defend what power and privilege you have, to ignore the plight of the marginalized and oppressed, then take this unusual Lenten advice. Don’t fast from food. Don’t fast from self-care and personal pleasures. Make sure you get a good night’s sleep. Exercise if you can. And remember that your identity is rooted in this truth - you are a beloved child of God. You are

full of the Holy Spirit. And this church loves you. You are not alone. So do not be afraid. Fill your belly and spend Lent resisting the same temptations Jesus faced. You see, the evil one doesn't have many cards to play. We're made to doubt our identity. The question that was asked of Jesus is asked of us, too, "If you are a child of God . . ." Not since we are, but if we are. Making us doubt our own identity. And we've all been tempted, throughout history, to hoard power, wealth, and self-sufficiency. They're the same temptations that he used on Jesus, so, lucky for us, we know how to respond. We just need the courage and conviction to resist.

Blessings on your forty days, my friends. Choose well. What we do in these next few days will shape the rest of our journeys, just as they shaped Jesus'. Amen.