

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Every first Sunday in Lent we always here the story of Jesus' temptation from the viewpoint of a synoptic gospel (that is Matthew, Mark, or Luke). Compared to last year's version from Mark, we have a lot more to work with here. In Luke, we see three distinct scenes where Jesus was tempted by the "devil." And the devil doesn't have a tail and a pitchfork, but in Greek, it is term for an "accuser" or "slanderer." It's a general term for one who disturbs a human's connection with God. And these temptations – or to translate it more literally from the Greek, these "tests" as in "a trial" often with a legal undertone – these temptations/trials/tests occur over 40 days in the wilderness. This desolate area with sticks and sand. This is a place "in between" - in between that town and the other village; in between Jesus' baptism and Jesus' ministry, this physical and metaphorical place in between what was and what will be this is where the accuser comes to life.

First, the devil urged Jesus to turn stone into bread. This temptation is trying to get Jesus to trust in his own power instead of God's provisions. It's about getting Jesus to control the world by giving and taking nourishment. Next, the accuser entices Jesus' ego with the promise of worldly authority and glory if only he worshipped the tempter. It's about selfish power over instead of power with and among.

Finally, the slanderer wants to smear God's name and destroy Jesus' identity using a cherry-picked reading of Scripture. The tempter wants to have Jesus

make a special of himself so that everyone might worship him and him alone. You see, each trial attempted to divert Jesus from God's mission. Every test is trying to get Jesus to focus on his own self-interest at the expense of God's purpose. Each temptation is about drawing Jesus into creating a literal empire of personality and rule of power that would be at odds with God's reign of love, justice, and peace.

And these temptations are not only for Jesus but are around us every day. The world tempts us away from compassion toward power, it draws us toward self-preservation away from mercy, and it wants to give us an entirely different way to live than that which God desires for us. And we get so use to worldly status quo that we become numb to God's desires. We begin to think that mercy and justice aren't a reality. We believe that community, humility, and caring for the marginalized are a pipe dream. We believe that only self-centered power and quid-pro-quo control will win.

We see this play out in our daily lives and on national levels. Every time presidential terms come to an end or a beginning, we see a flurry of pardons. At times, these pardons are not granted as acts of justice, mercy, or societal restoration but rather they're used as political tools. We watch those who committed acts of violence because of selfish ambition and unquestioned political loyalty go free, and our trust in justice becomes eroded. This manipulation of mercy for personal or political gain can easily lead us to cynicism. It tempts us to become indifferent to true acts of mercy and justice. It tempts us to do the same as we climb leadership ladders at work. It tempts us to brush under the rug injustice that we have witnessed. It tempts us to manipulate the system not in ways that bring about God's vision for the world,

but rather for our own selfish motivations and desires. You see, this tempter that we encounter is that same slanderer that Jesus confronted in the wilderness.

And in today's gospel, we saw Jesus resist those slanderous temptations. At every juncture, Jesus reaffirmed his commitment to God's word and mission. Jesus demonstrated that true power lies in humility and community. Jesus rejected self-serving act to build others up. Jesus highlighted that true mercy involves sacrifice that is rooted in God's principles of love and justice and peace.

You see, Jesus was presented with easy opportunities to go a different way. To give into our human tendency. To become a politician that determines who gets food and who does not. To become a king who wields power over people. To believe the lie that he was a self-made person. Yet, in each of those moments of uncertainty and change; those moments with a fork in the road; those moments where values and faith come to a head with power and privilege, Jesus *always* remained true to his God-given identity. His identity given in his baptism. A life that pursues justice and peace, that cares for those on the margins, that stands up to abuse and selfishness, and that is an active participant in bringing about God's mercy.

During our 40-day Lenten journey, we are focusing on God's mercy and exploring way that we, individually and collectively, can embody that mercy. For our God is merciful. God's love and forgiveness are freely given and not earned. God imagines justice as restorative and transformational. God's mercy is not passive pity, but active compassion and advocacy against the

slanderers in the world. And while our goal is not to become God, we have an opportunity to reflect God's mercy in little glimmers and glimpses.

Throughout the Lenten season, you are invited to explore God's mercy by rejecting the tendency to become indifferent amid injustice. Instead, we invite you to embody the disciplines of the season – to fast and pray, to repent and examine, to sacrificially give and to engage in works of love. For some, that might look like donating to the Lenten Project as we support refugees already here in the United States who have had their financial foothold pulled from under them as federal funds have been frozen. While we pray and advocate for funding to be released, we can provide money to help cover their first few months of rent and provide needed resources for those with young children. So too, we can help provide safe spaces for Black queer individuals who face intersectional discrimination and the backlash following the dismantling of DEI programs. And we can ensure that our space is truly reflective of God's vision of dignity and worth as we work to make this building ADA accessible. And if it's not monetary acts of mercy, your work of self-examination and repentance during this season cost you nothing. Your engagement with the free anti-racism resources provided by the Anti-racism committee or the heartfelt entrance into the Great Litany during worship are all active ways to challenge injustice and to bring about God's transformation. Your prayers for justice and your fasting from selfishness are the challenges of this Lenten season. These are the practices that help us to reject the Empire's self-centered control and instead can realign our actions with God's reign of love, justice, and peace.

Friends, welcome to the Lenten journey. Here in our liturgical wilderness and in the wilderness of our time, may we seek not to do our will but to let God's will be done. May we look to respond to the slanderers of the world with clarity of mind and love. May we seek to embody God's mercy throughout these 40 days and beyond. Amen.