

Lent 1 / March 6, 2022

Luke 4:3

“The devil said to Him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.””

Happy Lent. Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a season of penitence in which we consider our sins, so we would better appreciate our Saviour and the great gift of grace He earned through the suffering of His cross. A gift we receive through simple faith. Lent is a season of self-denial, through which we seek to better appreciate the words both Moses and Jesus spoke in the wilderness, saying, *“humans do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”*

Penitence is part of the Christian life. Penitence is to return daily to the fountain of our baptism in the confession of our sins, to receive forgiveness for the sake of Christ. Friday, the day of Christ’s crucifixion, was a traditional a day of penitence. As an act of penitence, fish was eaten instead of meat. In the medieval church, the penitential time was extended to cover the entire six weeks of Lent. The prohibition against meat was expanded to include eggs, butter and cheese. People voluntarily give up comforts and extravagances in Lent, following the example of Jesus, who fasted 40 days in the wilderness. Are you giving anything up for Lent?

I don’t think I would survive forty days of fasting. Just because Jesus did it, doesn’t mean we can or should do it too. Attempting to walk on the water is not advised, unless the lake is frozen. There are lots of things Jesus did that we can’t do; fasting for 40 days is probably one of them. The point of Lenten practices, or any penitential discipline, is not to make us be like Jesus. They are meant to help us believe Him more firmly and follow Him more faithfully. Jesus said, *“If anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me.”*

With that in mind, we could just as well take something up as give something up for Lent. Nevertheless, I don’t imagine having a chocolate milkshake everyday would qualify as taking up a cross. However, a person could take up a daily devotion, volunteer at something, consciously and intentionally pray for others, or begin a daily bible reading program. There are lot of things we could take up during Lent that wouldn’t even be burdensome, which would deepen our faith, broaden our understanding of scripture, draw us closer to Christ and enable us to follow Him more fully. Because when it comes down to it, the purpose of Lent is to draw us closer to Christ, believing that He is the Son of God.

Has anyone ever attempted to manipulate you to do their will? The devil tried to manipulate Jesus to prove He is the Son of God. First, by turning stone into bread. Second, by casting Himself down from a high place. The devil didn’t need proof. The unclean spirits saw Jesus and perceived Him to be the Son of God. It would be odd, if the chief unclean spirit was unable to see what the lesser devils saw. He was trying to control Jesus. What harm would it have been if Jesus had turned stone into bread? In the Old Testament, God caused water to spring from a rock. In the New Testament, Jesus would turn water into wine. The action was not the problem. The problem was the devil was trying to get Jesus to do his will. Jesus refused. He had come to do His Father’s will.

Jesus’ encounter with the devil harkens back to Eve and Adam’s encounter with the serpent in paradise, in which he tempted them to eat a little fruit. What was the big deal? There’s nothing wrong with eating fruit is there? The problem was that they allowed themselves to be manipulated by the serpent to do his will and disobey God’s will. There are two wills in the world; the devil’s will and God’s will. Sin came into the world when the serpent manipulated the woman and the man to do his will and reject God’s will.

Jesus came into the world as the divine representative of humanity, to release humans from bondage to sin, from the control of the devil and to lift from our heads the condemnation of sin, which is eternal death. Jesus did this through His perfect obedience to His Father’s will. Jesus would not do the devil’s will, even in a matter as small as making bread from stones. He would do His Father’s will. He was obedient to His Father, even unto death on the cross. By His obedience, He redeemed us from death and freed us from both the control of the devil and our own sinful will.

Jesus didn’t have to prove anything to anyone, not even to Himself. He was perfectly self-aware. He knew He is the Son of God, begotten from eternity. The Father declared Him His Son at His baptism. He knew the scriptures. When He was tempted, He held His ground. He had no need to prove anything to anyone. However, of His own free will, Jesus did offer many proofs that He is the Son of God. He healed the sick. He controlled nature. He fed the hungry. He raised the dead. But He did those things on His terms, in accordance with the Father’s will. The Pharisees, His chief antagonists, demanded a sign from heaven. He said, *“An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given to it, except the sign of Jonah.”* Jesus gave signs on His terms.

Jesus' greatest sign would His resurrection. Even as Jonah was three days in the belly of a fish and came out alive, He would arise after three days in the grave. Jesus would not be controlled or manipulated by anyone. He had come to do the will of His Father in heaven. In the garden, He struggled with the burden of the cross. He prayed that, if possible, the cup of suffering might pass from Him. Nevertheless, He concluded His prayers saying, "*yet not my will, but your will be done.*" God's will is the redemption of humanity and the salvation of the human soul. Jesus fulfilled the Father's will through His perfect obedience and sacrificial death, by which He atoned for human sin and became the Saviour of every soul who believes in His name.

Jesus is both the second Adam and the second Israel. Adam in paradise and Israel in the wilderness, failed to worship the Lord as their only God and to serve only Him. Jesus would serve no one but His Father in heaven. Adam and Israel were disobedient sons. They gave their will to the service of the devil. In contrast, Jesus was obedient to His Father in every way. In the letter to the Philippians St. Paul wrote: "*Although being in nature God, He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant...He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even to death on the cross.*"

The devil tempted Jesus to use His divine power to prove He is God's Son. The leaders of Israel challenged Him to prove He is the Son of God, by coming down from the cross. He had power to help others, but He would not use His power to help Himself. They jeered, "*He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him. For He said, 'I am the Son of God.'*" Jesus wouldn't come down from the cross. The cross was the Fathers' will. On the cross, Jesus suffered and died to pardon and sanctify you and I. Through the blood of His cross, Jesus paid the debt of sin, incurred through the disobedience of Adam and his descendants; including you and I. By His cross and through faith in Him, we receive strength in our times of testing and forgiveness when we fail the test. In Jesus and through His cross, we receive the promise of being forever set free from sin, death and the manipulation of the devil, by sharing in His resurrection to a new and everlasting life.

Do you have plans for Lent? Whether we take up or give up anything for Lent, what is most important is that we gather beneath Jesus' cross in repentance of our sins and sinfulness, to receive His grace in forgiveness. In Him we receive strength to help in every need. Through Him we receive forgiveness of all our sins. By Him we receive adoption as children of God, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the peace of a good conscience in relation to God and the promise of being forever free from the ill will of the devil, the world and our own sinful nature, sharing in His resurrection to everlasting life. During these six weeks of Lent, may God in His grace strengthen our faith and draw us closer to the heart of His love in Christ Jesus. In His name. Amen