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Luke 4: 1-13

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“God’s Strength and Our Weakness”

It is one of my earliest memories. I was standing next to my mother at the checkout counter of a convenience store and in front of me was a beautiful display of candies and confections that made my young eyes grow wide. “Hmmm,” I thought to myself, “that looks good!” I was old enough to have learned the difference between right and wrong, and I had enough experience under my belt to realize there are consequences to one’s actions. But, what I knew in my head was not enough to counter the need in my belly. I reached out slowly at first and then, quick as lightning, I grabbed a piece of candy and shoved it into my pocket. Of course, I had been seen but I thought I’d done the deed perfectly and in secret. It’s funny how our desires can give us a false sense of what others perceive. My mom immediately reached her hand down to my wrist and asked what I had in my pocket. This is the other strange thing that happened. She’d seen me and I knew she’d seen me but I pretended as if none of that was true. “What’s that in your hand?” she asked. “Nothing,” I said. “Then take your hand out of your pocket so we can have a look,” my mom demanded. The writing was beginning to appear on the wall. I slowly pulled my hand out of my pocket and as I opened my fingers the candy was there in full view. “We do not steal,” my mother said. “It is wrong. Put the candy back and tell the man behind the counter you are sorry and that you will never do it again.” I did what I was told and I learned my lesson that day. I don’t recall ever stealing candy again but I wish I could say I never felt again the tug of war inside me between knowing what I should not do yet feeling pulled to do it anyway. It was the Apostle Paul who wrote in the Book of Romans, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7: 15) Oh, temptation. It is the battleground of our souls. At the core of this battle is a spiritual tension, the implication of which goes much deeper than simply doing or saying the wrong thing. We are children of God. Through our baptisms and in this faith we are born of water and the Spirit. This is who we are created and called to be, God’s people in the world. When the tempter comes what is put on the line is our identity as those claimed and redeemed by God. And so, it’s no small matter, how in moments of decision we either step closer to God or find ourselves pulled further away. In the season of Lent, we face this spiritual reality with honesty, seeking God’s strength in the midst of our weakness.

Jesus is our help in this and our guide in all our efforts to live more faithfully. I’m reminded of another message in scripture, words of the early church, that describe Jesus as the “perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:2) We look to Jesus, who encourages us and leads us in stepping closer to God. The gospel story for today does this very thing as we follow the drama of how Jesus responded in the face of significant temptation. When we come to this place in his gospel, Luke has made the point that Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit. In fact, he writes, it is the Spirit which sends Jesus into the wilderness for forty days. Let’s take a moment to think about what that means for us. A spiritual life is not an easy life. Being in relationship with God does not lessen the struggle but, in most cases, intensifies the conflict. In other words, if we had never given ourselves to God we would not be tempted to turn away. So, it’s because Jesus is filled with the Spirit that he experiences this wilderness struggle. And, as we touched on earlier, this is not a matter of doing or saying the wrong thing, this struggle goes to the core of who Jesus is. He is the Son of God, and the tempter intends for Jesus to question that identity. The tempter wants Jesus to second guess whether a life with God is enough for him. “You want bread, don’t you, Jesus?..Certainly, you want more power and glory, don’t you?...You are human after all and so you must be looking for security and safety, aren’t you, Jesus?” What the tempter offers is an immediate way for Jesus to be filled up and lifted up. The tempter is pressing on his weakness trying to convince him there is an easier and more comfortable way. Sure, Jesus is called by God but he has other options. Yes, Jesus is the Son of God, but there are other roads he can follow. His 40 days in the wilderness are a spiritual tug-of-war because what’s on the line is his decision as to whether or not God is enough. What he decides will set the course for his life. To each temptation, to all other options, Jesus responds faithfully. This is why he is the perfecter of our faith. His relationship with God is more than enough and he encourages us to take hold of the same truth. For him, God’s claim upon his life is everything and nothing can tempt him to do or say otherwise. As he walks that road Jesus says to us, follow me.

When I was a child standing in front of that array of candy I didn’t see that experience as a reflection of our human condition but it was. Life constantly presents us with options and we find ourselves going after what can make us feel good in the moment while losing sight of the bigger and deeper picture. A number of years ago, I read a piece written by an Episcopalian priest, Barbara Brown Taylor. She said there is an empty place inside of all of us that can only be filled by God but she said most of us spend a great deal of our time trying to fill that space in other ways. We go after what feels right in the moment. We grab whatever promise or power seems to make us stronger now and that’s the irony of it. No matter what we take or grab from what the world offers the emptiness remains and

our weakness stays. Jesus shows us the way. A deep life with God is what satisfies. A firm trust in God is what protects our souls. God is our strength and anything less than God leave us still hungry and wanting.

It was a 40 day journey for our Lord and now these 40 days of Lent are our time to say God is more than enough. The Christian tradition encourages us in this season to give up things that will remind us of how much we long for God. The idea is that when the craving hits we will fill that space with prayer or with reflection on our faith. I've always thought that another way to go as a Lenten discipline is not giving up something but taking something on for God's sake. In that spirit, I suggest we take on a renewed commitment to be who God has called us to be. We are God's people. These 40 days aren't so much about what we do or don't do. This is a time to be strengthened in who we are. When you're hungry, when you're needing to be more secure, when you're wondering what can fill the emptiness in you, know that God is enough. The tempter is close by, of that we can be sure but so is God, as near to us as the beating of our own hearts. God is our strength in this and in every time of need. With Christ as our lead we move forward in confidence and in faith.