A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“A Body of Faith”

Luke 4:1-13

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The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It wasn’t going to be easy.

I don’t know what Jesus thought this was going to be like. While he was toweling off from his baptism, he had to be feeling pretty good though, wouldn’t you think. Baptism for anyone is a sacred, special moment, but none of us have gotten the kind of reception he did.

The heavens opened up.

The Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove.

A voice from heaven rang out, “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”

Rarely does Trinitarian glory shine like it did at Jesus’ baptism, the voice of the Father, the manifestation of the Spirit, the Son: beloved, affirmed, commissioned to his redemptive ministry. Surely, he was feeling pretty good about things. This is a good start. But if Jesus had any idea--any idea at all in his mind that his incarnate life would be an easy road to cosmic glory, it was dispelled very quickly, in the wilderness, where the Spirit immediately sent him, for a different kind of baptism.

If he hadn’t learned it before, he learned it now. Created bodies get hungry. Not just, “I’d love a piece of chocolate” hungry, or “It’s been a few hours since my last meal” hungry. Really hungry. It’s the way all life is created, cycles of hunger, eating, satisfaction, renewed strength, and then hunger again. Our lives are ordered by our need for food. We share this characteristic with plants, fish, all animals and the 12 million children in our country who don’t know where their next meal is coming from.

Jesus spent a long time without eating. Luke says it was 40 days--which is a very long time. It’s something like not opening your refrigerator again until Easter Sunday, April 21. Most of us are just happy to make it to lunch without our stomachs awkwardly growling loudly during a moment of silence.

Jesus was hungry, just like you would be. His body was in pain, just like yours would be. He suffered. Just like you would suffer. He was fully God--yes, let’s never forget that, but he was also fully human. This story makes no sense if we allow his divine nature to invalidate the experience of being human when in fact it complicates it even further. He was fully human, in the wilderness, all alone, and he was hungry.

Why?

I wonder if he asked that question. Why was he out there? There’s no ancient wisdom I’m aware of that says a messiah must be ordained by 40 days in the wilderness not eating anything. There’s no law that says he couldn’t eat something. There’s more instruction to you about not drinking a soda during Lent than there was for Jesus fasting for 40 days. So, why?

The Spirit led him there. The Spirit led him to the wilderness. One of the other gospels says the Spirit drove him out there, or pushed him out there. Whatever else this is, this is not just his choice. It seems to have something to do with learning what it means to be human right as he’s about to begin his public ministry with and to other humans. Humans get hungry. They suffer pain. Jesus is learning solidarity with human need. It looks a lot, too, like he’s living in one human life the story of Israel, the nation whose life was defined by their journey in the wilderness and whose faith was refined by their need to trust in God in all things—even their hunger. Like they journeyed in the wilderness for 40 years, he’s there for 40 days. Like they were hungry and thought they would die, so he now hungers and wonders the same about himself.

Then one day, it’s amazing actually that it hadn’t happened until then, one day Jesus looks down at a stone at his feet, one of those rounded stones that are strewn across the landscape of barren places all around the world. He looks down at the stone and the idea crosses his mind: that stone looks like it would make an amazing loaf of bread. It has weight in his hands. His fingers trace the textures of the stone’s surface like a flaky crust.

That idea came from somewhere. Luke says it came from the devil. That’s important to remember, that the temptation that was about to come was coming from the Father of Lies, the Deceiver who in this moment with Jesus is returning to the strategies that had worked in the beginning when the 1st Adam, who was not hungry at all and had everything he could have wanted to eat right there for him in the fruitful garden, heard the words of temptation, “Did God really say not to eat the fruit of that tree?” Did God really say that? Those words have always worked with human creatures. Jesus was tempted to turn a stone into bread to eat.

The mental image of a red, pointy tailed, pitchfork carrying devil standing next to Jesus having a discussion with him gets in the way of hearing this story for its power, so I hope you’ll push that image out of your mind. You have to picture a man alone, all alone. You have to picture him hungry, so hungry. And you have to hear the words in his ear, in his mind as if they were his own thought. If we make the devil a cartoonish and obvious tempter, it’s not temptation. If Jesus can swat the thought away like batting practice because he’s God and the devil is . . .the devil . . .it’s not really much of what we could call a temptation. But if the temptation is subtle...if the idea is whispered…if it just comes and sits next to you and makes friends with you…and if the thing is possible, and if it’s desired, well . . .we know what temptation is like.

Temptations have a persuasive quality to them in which something bad seems like something good. A temptation is not a temptation unless it’s within your power to enact it. Otherwise it’s just an idea. But if you can solve a problem, cease some suffering, take some action, and it’s in your power to do it, now you’re working with something.

Jesus was tempted. He could command the stone to become bread and presumably it would. Later he made water blush into wine and a few loaves multiply to feed thousands. He could do this.

We must see the utter force of this temptation. This was something Jesus could do. This was something Jesus in some way must have wanted to do. This would solve a problem, relieve his suffering, and besides what actual harm would be done? What, the world can’t do with one less rock? Somehow that would disrupt the natural order of things like a butterfly effect?

I can’t really quite figure out how Jesus would have sinned simply by eating a loaf of wonder bread in the wilderness. But I don’t think it’s simply a matter of being tempted to sin. There’s no law against eating bread or turning a stone into bread if you’re able to do so. This was not a temptation to commit a sin like we think of an individual sin, like a temptation to do something clearly and obviously wrong like with Adam and Eve who were tempted to go against exactly what God had told them.

This was something even more sinister and devious. It’s a temptation to shortcut his identity. If he turns that stone into bread to cease the suffering of hunger he was experiencing, what else will he be willing to do to avoid suffering? All three of the temptations pointed in this same direction.

One is about bread, and solving a problem his human body presented.

One is about empires, and solving the problem of political powers.

One is about the temple, and solving the problem of religious institutions.

He didn’t have all those problems just yet but he would, in no time at all. These three entities would converge to bring about his death. His body suffering, on a Roman cross, with the collusion of the temple priests and leaders. In the end, the church and state would conspire to hang his body on a cross until it died. This was to be the fate of the Word become flesh to dwell among us. But it didn’t have to be. He had the power to stop it, to save himself from this pain. The temptations were not: what will you do in the wilderness? The temptations were: what will you do with your life?

The courage and faith that he had at Gethsemane as he prayed, “Take this cup from me, but not my will but yours be done.” was born in him in the wild when he refused to shortcut his humanity by his divinity and turned away from the temptation to control creation, people and institutions around him for his own preservation. The faith he had to submit to God in all things was born right here.

The real temptation wasn’t just whether he would eat some bread instead of fasting, but was under what conditions he would use his power to escape from suffering? What would he give to combat or control kingdoms and empires who were serving the force of darkness? What would he do to overcome corrupt, self-serving religion? The answers: nothing, but die for them. He would not be the kind of messiah who rides in to take charge and bend the world to his purposes.

He would be a different kind, knew himself called to be a different kind of messiah, the prophet of an upside down, inside out world, herald of a God whose power looks like weakness to the human eye and whose wisdom sounds like foolishness to the human ear. The path that led to Gethsemane was set in the wilderness and from it he never wavered.

We began our Lenten journey by marking one another’s head with the cross in ash under gray cloths. We will end the journey by washing one another’s feet as gray gives way to black. From head to toe, this journey with Christ calls for our whole selves. Our hungers, our politics, our religion. Our needs, our wants, our fears. That which fulfils us and that which threatens us. We’re all in on this journey.

Lent is a bodily season. The great Lenten disciplines are about fasting, confession, and almsgiving. It’s not just a heart season. It’s not just a head season. It’s about our bodies. Whatever Lenten disciplines we embrace, our bodies are involved, not as sacrifice to God in hope of salvation. That sacrifice has already been paid. We don’t earn our salvation. But our bodies are involved in participation in the work of the Spirit—in us. It’s in Lent most of all that we remember our faith isn’t just mental assent and isn’t just emotive expression; it’s about our bodies, asking our stomachs to hurt a little bit from fasting; our knees to be a little sore, bent in prayer; our hands a little tender from service; our feet a little tired from going where they are led.

Lent is an embrace of a little pain to remember that we, too, are human—all in created glory and all in need of grace. If we endure bodily discipline past the point of comfort even just a little, we do so in solidarity with those who, beyond their choice and without the power to change things, suffer already enduring broken bodies, broken lives, and broken hearts. We do so in solidarity with all creation, groaning as if in childbirth for its redemption. This is holy work: the prayer of our bodies joining the cries of all creation.

Jesus would not abandon us even through his terrible suffering. He would not forsake the path. He would not call down 10,000 angels to rescue him; he would not call down manna in the wilderness to feed him. He would not abandon his body; he would not call a heavenly army to fight his battles, or perform miracles to convince skeptical religious leaders of the righteousness of his mission. He simply was faithful, in whatever circumstances, at whatever cost to the calling to bring salvation to a hurting, broken world by taking on its hurt, its brokenness, its sin, and its death.

For us, the Lenten journey with Jesus has begun. It’s not going to be easy. And it shouldn’t be. But Christ has gone before us and goes with us now still. Amen.

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