

# JUST LENT: The Temptation of Religion

Matthew 4:1-11 and Isaiah 58:1-9a

Covenant Presbyterian Church

First Sunday in Lent, March 5, 2017

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The Bible tells us that Jesus was tempted for 40 days in the wilderness. This is why our season of Lent lasts for 40 days. Lent began on Ash Wednesday, which we marked four days ago here in the sanctuary. The season continues until the day before Easter Sunday, April 16, which is forty days, excluding the Sundays.

During this season of Lent, Christians traditionally dig a little deeper, with reflection on temptation and sin. One traditional scripture to begin Lent comes from Psalm 51, a reflection on sin, with the powerful refrain: Create in me clean heart O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Lent is a time when Christians have more focus on spiritual disciplines like prayer, scripture, worship, and sometimes, fasting. Fasting is an ancient religious practice involving abstaining from food, drink, or something else, with the hope of humbling oneself and drawing closer to God.

Fasting was not uncommon in the time of the prophet Isaiah, and in our second reading, we hear God speaking through the prophet, telling the people in very strong language that something was missing from their fasting.

Listen for the word of God, spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.

<sup>2</sup>Yet day after day they seek me  
and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgments,  
they delight to draw near to God.

<sup>3</sup>“Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”  
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,  
and oppress all your workers.

<sup>4</sup>Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.

<sup>5</sup>Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?

<sup>6</sup> Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

<sup>8</sup> Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

<sup>9</sup> Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

Temptation. Our gospel reading today invites us to think about temptation. When we use the word, it is usually about dessert or something like that. But in the gospel reading today, temptation is a profound issue of identity.

The temptation narrative comes in the gospels after Jesus has been baptized, when his identity is confirmed with the voice of God, who says “This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

The devil tempts Jesus, even quoting scripture, trying to get Jesus to forget his identity, his purpose, his calling.

If you really are the Son of God, then you can do whatever you want...

Jesus resists the temptation of a false identity and stays true to who he is.

I believe a central task of religious people is to claim our identity as children of God, to be the people we were intended to be.

The temptation of religion is to think that religious ritual is enough, without fully claiming our new identity and living a changed life.

The people in Isaiah's time apparently fell into the temptation of forgetting their identity, their calling, their true religion. Yes, they were in the temple and yes they were even fasting, but the scripture suggests that outside the trappings of their religion, they were not acting with justice and righteousness.

God seems to be saying that their religion was only on the surface, only for show, and God wanted them to make it real, with acts of justice.

In these few verses we get the sense that the supposedly religious people in Isaiah's day were:

Exploiting workers

Tolerating hunger and poverty

Indifferent to human suffering.

Isaiah's powerful witness is consistent with the overriding biblical theme of justice for those who are too often forgotten and ignored.

And Isaiah is not alone. The prophet Amos voiced a similar concern, in a different time and different context.

Amos 5:24 is a favorite verse for many people:

let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

It is a powerful call to seek God's justice and righteousness, and it looks good on posters or in social media quotes.

But we need to hear this verse in context. God, speaking through Amos was specifically calling out the religious people of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, who like those in the 6<sup>th</sup> century for Isaiah, were going through the motions of religion, while ignoring people in need. Listen to this surprisingly strong reflection on worship:

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

You would think God would be pleased with a worship service, but apparently not if the people in the worship service aren't making a difference in the world.

God has strong words for supposedly religious people who don't put their faith into practice, for those who learn something but don't live it.

What about us?

We go to church on Sunday morning

We appreciate great music

We look in awe at Lenten banners

We listen attentively to an inspiring sermon,

That's all great, but it's not enough.

God calls us to not just go through the motions of being religious, or being religious for show, but to really take on a new identity and live with a new sense of purpose.

We pass the peace in here, and that calls us to be peacemakers out there—in politics, in race, at work, at school, even around the dinner table.

We share Communion here, feeding our hungry souls, and that empowers us to help feed hungry people out there.

My invitation to you in this season of Lent is live a more integrated life.

My hope is that you'll go deeper with religious practices, like prayer, scripture, and fasting, which I hope will help you go deeper with pursuing justice in the world.

In your bulletin today you see our Lenten devotional, which I hope will help you in this season of Lent.

I invite you to find time to read and reflect, and then to consider fasting—giving up something in your life that might have too much control over you.

One way of thinking about fasting is that we are giving up something we want to focus on what God wants.

But our Lenten practice can't end with us Scripture, prayer, and fasting. We need to live an integrated faith, and the Bible is clear that God wants justice in the world.

So on the sheet you see several options for acting with justice in this season. Reaching out and making a difference in the world.

Lots of options.

Please don't try to do everything on this sheet. Pick one way of fasting and one way of acting. Ask God to guide you and show you the way.

May this be a deep and rich and just Lenten season for us all.

Let us pray....