

TAKE ME TO THE CROSS
Rev. Dennis H. Kelly

Four days ago, on Ash Wednesday, Christians all over the world joined together to begin the Season of Lent. The practice of Lent is rooted deeply in the Early Christian church tradition of preparation for adult baptism which typically would take place at the Easter Vigil. After a year or two of studying scripture and the practices of adult discipleship, the candidates for baptism would spend the forty days of Lent preparing for baptism by observing the Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

The way the rite of baptism is observed has changed throughout the history of the Christian church and varies from denomination to denomination. The Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox churches, and Protestant churches all have different Lenten and Baptismal practices. Even among Protestants there is a variation in our baptismal theology and practice, as well as, the observation of Lent. Some evangelical communities don't even observe the Lenten season, at least in any meaningful or significant way.

As Lutherans, we strive to maintain the importance of the Lenten observance. While most do not make a connection between Lent and the preparation for baptism at an Easter Vigil, we still make the connection of Lent as a time of preparation for the celebration of Easter. For Lutherans, Lent is not an event, but a journey.

There are several layers of meaning in our Lenten journey. First of all, it is a **liturgical journey**. The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and continues on up to Holy Week. The music of Lent is penitential and reflection with an emphasis on human sin and lifting up the importance of the cross. The color of Lent is purple. Purple represents suffering, the suffering of Jesus leading up to Jesus as well as the suffering of the world under sin. Purple also is a symbol of royalty, anticipating the resurrection of Jesus and his victory over death.

Lent is also a **scriptural journey**. The lessons of Lent take up the Gospel narrative of Jesus in the wilderness just after his baptism and continue on to the gates of Jerusalem prior to the passion. In between the wilderness and Jerusalem, we experience a series of events which put the ministry of Jesus in perspective. Everything Jesus does leads up to, and is only understood in the context of, the passion, the crucifixion and the resurrection. A common theme is the sacrifice Jesus must make in order to bring salvation to all the world.

Lent is also a **spiritual journey**. As we gather together for Lenten worship and hear the words of scripture, we are invited to take our own journeys. That journey this year is aptured in the theme *Living Lent as People of the Resurrection*. On this journey we reflect upon what it means to be lost, what it means to be far away from our spiritual home, what it means to be controlled by those things we fear in our lives.

Throughout Lent we are invited to repent, to turn our heart, mind, body and soul back towards God, the source of life and love and being. We are invited to leave the wilderness and return home, where we are welcomed into the arms of our loving heavenly father. Home is symbolized by the garden of Easter morning.

Our Gospel lesson for today, the story of ***Temptation in the Wilderness*** is a story of how Jesus prepares for his journey, his mission. The story immediately follows his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. After his baptism, he is filled with the Spirit. This spirit directs him to go out in the wilderness for a time of preparation.

The writers of Luke, Matthew and Mark are very clear that the primary reason that Jesus is sent out into the wilderness by the Spirit is to be tempted by the devil. He has just accepted the mission for which he has been sent by God. One would assume that Jesus would have been eager to begin this ministry and mission. But before he takes one step into the public arena, Jesus must first prepare himself for this ministry. Clearly it will not be easy work. And so he journeys into the wilderness to prepare himself for the events that would follow. It is a time to let go of any attachments he still holds on to in from his previous life and work. It is also a time to let go of any doubts.

Luke tells us several important things about how Jesus goes about preparing for his journey to Jerusalem. First of all, Luke tells us that Jesus stays in the wilderness to pray and fast for forty days. We are also told that Jesus is confronted by the great adversary of God's plan of salvation – the devil. This confrontation takes the form of three temptations or barriers which the devil uses to try to stop God's plan of salvation before Christ's mission begins.

The first temptation is one that attacks Jesus on a **physical level**. During forty days of fasting, Jesus is physically hungry. So the evil one attempts to sidetrack Jesus through hunger. But Jesus does not succumb to this temptation. Quoting scriptures, Jesus says, "One does not live by bread alone."

The second temptation is one that attacks Jesus on the level of an **emotional level** – particularly the human drive for power and control. Again Jesus will not be persuaded. Quoting scripture, Jesus says, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

The third temptation is one that attacks Jesus on a **spiritual level**. The evil encourages Jesus to test the power and the promises of God by jumping off a tower. Again, Jesus refuses to give in to temptation. Again he quotes scripture: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Three times the devil tries to challenge Jesus readiness for mission. And three times Jesus demonstrates that he is ready to undertake the mission for which he has been sent. Jesus is prepared for the journey toward Jerusalem and all the things he will experience along the way.

I wonder what would have happened if the events of the baptism of Jesus had taken place. Would he have a clear sense of his mission? Would he have been spiritually strong enough to endure the physical and emotional challenges that he faces in the wilderness? Note that each time he is challenged by Satan he responds with words of scripture. His spiritual strength is rooted firmly in God's word. It is his rock and foundation.

I mentioned earlier that there are three dynamics to this Lenten journey. The first is liturgical: Taking a journey through the Season of Lent from Ash Wednesday to Holy Week. The second is scriptural as we read and experience selected stories of Jesus which take place along his journey from the wilderness to Jerusalem. The third is spiritual as each one of us is invited to use Lent as a time of personal reflection, to encourage us to take a journey the cradle to the cross. The key questions we will ask throughout this Lenten season is this: What does it mean for you to take a journey through Lent and live with others as people of the resurrection? Does your faith stand firmly on the foundation of scriptures and the word of God?