

## “Awaiting Lent.”

**F**or a lot of people, Lent is no fun. I think it’s because they see it as a season of deprivation— as a season of doing without something they truly enjoy. And even if, instead of giving something up, you take something on, it’s likely to be something you feel you *should* do, rather than something you *want* to do. So, whether you’re giving something up for Lent, or taking something on for Lent, the end is likely going to be the same: No fun for anyone.

And that’s why I wanted to begin this sermon with a Lenten joke. Don’t stop me if you’ve heard it; it’s the only joke I know.

A man walks into a bar and asks the bartender to set up three pints of ale. When the bartender asked why the man wanted all three all at the same time, rather than simply one after another, the man explained: “I have two brothers and we’re very close, but live quite far apart. The three of us agreed that, on this very day each year, we would each go into a bar, order three pints of ale, and salute the others with a pint of ale.” Alright, the bartender thought, whatever.

This practice continued for several years until, one year, the man came into the bar and asked the bartender to set up only two pints of ale. Not being a dummy, the bartender immediately understood the implications of this change in practice. And so, placing the two pints in front of the man, the bartender began to offer his condolences on the obvious loss of one of the man’s brothers. “Ah, no,” the man explained, “my brothers are fine. It’s just that Ash Wednesday was last week, and, unlike my brothers, I’ve decided to give up drinking for Lent.”

Alright, so, here we are at the beginning of the Season of Lent. And, as it works out, in our gospel reading we’re also at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. And apparently the first thing that Jesus needs to do before he does *anything* else, is to spend 40 days in the wilderness.

Now, we're not told *why* Jesus had to spend all that time out there, or even *what* he was supposed to accomplish, but the length of time he spent in the wilderness does tell us something. Because, in the Bible, when the number 40 is attached to a span of time— whether it's Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, or the Israelite's 40 years in the wilderness— we know that it's going to be a time of trials and temptations and tests; a sort of probationary period, if you will. And so it is with Jesus.

And so, after a time of fasting and prayer, but mostly I think a time of waiting, Jesus faces 3 challenges. I'm going to elaborate a bit on how our gospel text describes them, but I think you'll see why it makes sense to do so.

In the first challenge, the devil says to Jesus, "Look around you, Jesus. There's nothing but dirt and stones. But what if those stones were loaves of bread. There would be lots of bread, and free for the taking. There would be no hunger anymore. People would be fed. And they'd hail you as the great provider. Imagine it: bread enough for the whole world. So, go ahead and command these stones to become loaves of bread."

But Jesus said, "We don't live by bread alone."

And then there was the second challenge. The Judean desert wilderness has as many deep gullies as it has high cliffs. And upon one of those high cliffs, the devil says to Jesus: "Imagine that all this is yours; your world, with you in power. And with you in control, there would be no more wars; no more conflicts. All you have to do is simply worship me for a change. It's an attractive offer, isn't it? And as long as the end is good, it doesn't really matter how you get there, does it?"

But Jesus says, "Worship God, and serve him only."

And finally, for the third challenge, Jesus and the devil are standing on the highest point of the Temple in Jerusalem. The devil says to him: "Take a step forward, but don't worry, God won't desert you. His angels will catch you, before you hit the ground. But when the people see it happen, they'll have proof-positive that God really does do miracles. Everyone will believe. Imagine it: Indisputable religious proof. And it's just one step away. Try it, Jesus."

But Jesus says, "Don't put God to the test."

And with that, the challenges were over.

But what's interesting to ponder is the possibility of *what might have happened* if Jesus had failed any of the challenges; or if he had simply given in to any of the temptations.

For example, if Jesus had turned the stones into bread, there could have been enough bread to feed everyone in the world. Jesus could have ended world hunger.

Or, if Jesus had given in to the temptation of possessing absolute authority over all the world, it could have meant the end of human conflict forever; there could have been peace throughout the world.

Or, if Jesus had given in to the temptation of making a public display of leaping from the top of the Temple— *and living*— there could have been irrefutable proof for faith in God.

And so, one way of looking at these challenges that Jesus faced is that they were temptations to find *a quick and easy way* to achieve what he had been sent to do in the first place: to do good; to make the world a better place. And that makes them sound pretty good— except for the small print— because it would require Jesus to turn his back on God.

But the main reason the temptations didn't work— the main reason they wouldn't have worked— is because Jesus knew that, sometimes, there are no shortcuts, there are no easy ways to get some things done.

Here's the thing: **If you try to change the world, without first changing the human heart, it's likely those changes won't stick, and we'll be in worse shape than before.**

So, it's fortunate that Jesus turned his back on **easy bread, easy power,** and **easy faith**, and stayed in the wilderness to wait. Because what he was waiting for, was for God to fully prepare him for the task at hand.

A lot of people would like to skip Lent, and go straight to Easter. But if we do that, it's very likely that we'll get stuck.

Stuck with those habits that we don't like, and which keep holding us back.

Stuck in the ever-present craziness that demands we fill every second of our day with busyness.

Stuck in a life that has no room left in it for the things that are most important.

Stuck, in other words, in a life that leaves no room for God.

So, let's think of Lent in these terms: that Lent is a gift. It might not seem like it, because we don't like waiting. But Lent is a time when we are reminded that we need to pay attention not just to our lives, but also *to our souls*.

Lent is a time when we can listen to our bodies, and look at our habits, and ask ourselves whether they really reflect who we are and what we really value.

It's a time when we can reflect on our priorities, and think about what we really want, and what we really need.

Lent is a time when we can ponder who we are, and whose we are.

In other words, Lent is a gift of time.

And so, in this Lenten time we sit with Jesus out in the wilderness, preparing, and waiting.

Waiting to see God at work in the world.

Waiting to see where God will lead us. Waiting, and not rushing into doing things the easy way.

And waiting, especially, for resurrection.

But for now, there is just the waiting.

Amen.