

Hubris

(Give it up for Lent)

Isaiah 58:5-6

Matthew 4:1-2

Scripture Lesson from the OT: “Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed, and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes for a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord? Is this not instead the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke and to let the oppressed go free breaking every bond of slavery?”

Scripture Lesson from the NT: “Then Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He became hungry.”

This is the word of the Lord for the people of God.

I have another story for you today; a “geography” story about the homeland of Jesus. Traveling due east from Jerusalem on the road to Jericho south of the Dead Sea lies the Negev Desert and the Judean wilderness. Warm breezes from the Mediterranean Sea flow this way but are held captive by the mountains to the west dropping their life-giving moisture long before they reach this dry and thirsty landscape. There is water here, but to find it you must descend into the valley from the mountains down through the steep mountain canyons.

If you plan to hike through this land and wait until afternoon to begin, the intense heat will soon take its toll. On the other side, should you find your way through, is the Jordan River Valley green and lush, where you there is abundant water, and rest to be had in the shade of palms and olive trees.

This wilderness is the land of the desert prophets; the land where the scapegoat was left to die, the land of John the Baptist, and land of the temptations of Jesus.

In the Bible, the word “wilderness” suggests a geographical metaphor that is ripe with spiritual meaning for the people of God. The wilderness is a place of preparation for ministry, a place for prayer and penitence, a place to listen quietly and wait for God’s direction, and a place of Sabbath rest from the labors of life.

After God delivered the Hebrew children from Pharaoh, He sent them into the wilderness where Moses was given the Ten Commandments.

It was in the wilderness where the people complained of hunger and where God fed them with manna from heaven.

It was in the wilderness where the people complained of thirst and God gave them to drink with water from the rock.

It was in the wilderness where the people sinned by making false gods of gold.

The wilderness is where the true character of God’s people has always been revealed from out of the deprivations of life. This is the place where prophets were made, and kings were confounded. This is the place where Jesus went toe-to-toe with all the forces of evil and darkness and emerged from the conflict as the savior of His people. Thus, it was for the molding of His character as God’s “beloved Son” that Jesus was sent to the wilderness by His heavenly Father.

But the stakes in the wilderness are always high, and were never higher than they were with the temptations faced there by Jesus. For the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness were also the temptations of God’s people.

The church calls them the archenemies of the soul’s ongoing battle against human sin. Call them what you will, place them anywhere in the chronicles of history, and at the end of day you will still find yourself in the same struggle of life and death and heaven and hell, and there is no escaping from it except to press onward to the perfect faith of Jesus Christ.

It is the season of Lent, the season of the church where we wait patiently for the Child of Christmas to mature into the Man of Easter, for “Immanuel” to grow-up and become “Yeshua.”

The “forty days and nights” of desolation and privation experienced during this season are days and nights for us to be spent in the wilderness of life seeking God’s guidance and direction.

Recently, in Facebook forums I have been reading some of the different ramblings and musings as to what is the true meaning of Lent. It seems that for most people, Lent is either ignored entirely, or is celebrated as being a season when we are required to give up something for the sake of personal identification with the suffering of Christ.

In one of the forums, a writer asked for the thoughts and opinions of other forum members on what they were planning to “give-up for Lent” this year.

As I thought for a moment about some of the different things that people have traditionally given up for Lent, usually personal indulgences of the kind that will not offend others or upset their normal lives too much- It suddenly occurred to me that giving-up certain questionable habits that we have placed in the category of “little sins,” -habits that we call “bad”, was not what God hopes to receive from us at Lent.

But instead, what God really wants from us is for us to “fast” from the attractions of the world and discipline ourselves to hold tightly to His promises practicing radical obedience to Him for a season.

You see friends, I believe that what the Lord really wants from His church is not a people that are content to give God only the little things they want to get rid of in the hope they can hang onto everything else, but instead, a people that will radically obey Him in all things and trust Him with everything they have.

Thus, at Lent, what God really wants from His church are a humbled people who know they need to make an attitude adjustment to get something started in their lives for the sake of heaven, and who realize there is no better place to do that than being alone with the devil in the wilderness of life. In this way, we are all hearing God’s call to go, but we must decide whether we will obey him or not.

In Matthew 4:1-11 we read of the temptations of Jesus by the devil in the wilderness. Now Satan thinks he has the Son of God right in His crosshairs where he wants him. Jesus is now out in the desert where there is no help for him except from His Father in heaven, who has now withdrawn from Him to watch and wait. Matthew 4:2 says that “after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He was hungry.”

Of course, the devil believes that being human, Jesus is only thinking about His empty stomach. So, he tells Jesus that if you are “the beloved Son that God is so well pleased with” then just make this pile of stones into bread. I’m sure the devil was somewhat surprised when Jesus quoted Moses in Deuteronomy 8:3 stating that, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but every word from the mouth of God.”

Then in Matthew 4:5, we read that the devil took Jesus to the top of the temple in Jerusalem where He thought he would try to play the scripture quoting game to his advantage and says that if you are indeed the beloved Son that God is so well pleased with, then why don’t you just throw yourself down from this temple, for it is written in Psalm 91:11 that, “He will give his angels charge of you and they will make sure that not a hair on your head will be harmed.” And Jesus fired right back again, “On the other hand, as you well know, it is written,” (in Deuteronomy 6:16), that “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

I can only imagine the patronizing tone of the devil’s voice saying, “Ooh, Son of God, you’re so spiritual, but we’re out here in the wilderness, just you and me, and where’s your daddy now?” You got no food, you got no strength, you got no help, you got nothing!

But I’ll tell you what, I’m in a good mood today, let me show you what I’ve got. So in Matthew 4:8 we read that the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain where He shows Him all of the kingdoms of the world, and then He says, “I’ll give them all to you right now if you fall down and worship me.”

I can hear the firm resolve in the voice of Jesus as He quotes scripture again. This time using His Father’s own words. In Matthew 4:10 He answers, “Be gone Satan; for it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.”

Friends, the story of Christ's victory over Satan in the wilderness provides us with a double-edge sword of both comfort and calling. We are at first comforted in Christ's victory over the devil because the highest and best possible celebration of the Lenten season has been given to us through our Lord's achievement. There could have been no greater temptation for the Son of God in the world than the three fiery darts that Jesus faced from Satan in the wilderness.

But embedded just beneath the surface in His achievement there also is a summons for us to go into the wilderness ourselves to endure a season of waiting and temptation.

When viewed in this way, the Lenten season of Jesus Christ in the wilderness is a gift from God because it teaches us to have faith in God's word and to surrender our lives to His plan for our salvation. In this way, Lent is a season of moving on rather than a season of giving up. A season of holding onto God's promises a little tighter while letting loose a little of our grip on the world.

When I finally got around to throwing my hat into the ring of the Facebook forum with my idea of the right thing to be "giving up" for the coming Lenten season, a single word came to mind, *Hubris*. The word "Hubris" comes from the Greek noun, that means to be in possession of a wanton arrogance as a result of an overbearing pride of life that is greatly in excess of one's true value.

Hubris is not merely pride in one's achievements, but is the self-deluded belief that one's actions transcend the law in all matters simply because of the superiority of the self. How about "Hubris" I wrote? If we are to give-up something for Lent that would genuinely impress God and truly make a difference in the world, how about we give up our "Hubris"?

In Isaiah 58:5 we read, "Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Will you call this a fast, an acceptable day to the Lord?"

You see friends, God gave us a great gift when He gave us the season of Lent. And the Lent God gave us was the Lent of His Beloved Son. To put a fine point on it, our Lent will never please God completely until we have faced down the devil in the wilderness as Jesus did.

We are simply not in the right attitude for practicing the letting go of our Lent until we have taken hold of the Lent of Jesus Christ. Thus, the Lenten calling from God for us to go forth into the wilderness with Jesus is the call for us to fast from *Hubris*, the way Jesus fasted from it.

If this is ever to occur, our standard for obedience to the will of the Father must be conformed the standard of the beloved Son's obedience to His will. The strong courageous humanity that Jesus Christ demonstrated against His demons in the wilderness is the strong courageous humanity that we must demonstrate during Lent.

At Lent our humility in faith must reflect His humility so that our journey to Easter will likewise reflect His journey. Thus, God's call for us to journey into the wilderness of Lent is a call for us to go on a journey that will never be finished by us until "It is finished" finally by the blood of Jesus on the cross of Calvary.

Most of us have come to believe that the temptations of Jesus from Satan were only the three temptations we read of in Matthew's gospel. And after the devil left Him there all future temptations were past.

But that is not the end of the story, for there was a fourth temptation, one that is not written in Matthew's gospel but was there, nevertheless. A temptation that is an integral part of the others, yet is greater than all of them. A temptation that was outside of them but was also inside them lurking just beneath the surface.

Can you see it? It was the fourth temptation of the wilderness, the hidden temptation born of human pride, "hubris" the pride of life that wants it all, and wants it NOW! The pride of life that demands "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting" of Easter glory without the self-denial and sacrifice of Lent!

You will notice the hint of its presence in the language of Luke's gospel, chapter 4:13, where we read, "And when the devil finished every temptation, he departed from Him *until an opportune time*." This scripture tells us that the devil had finished his work with Jesus for today knowing well that tomorrow will soon be coming!

Friends, has it ever occurred to you that the spiritual practice of discipline, much like the spiritual joy of accomplishment, is a gift from God? The old adage says that “Practice makes perfect” which sounds good on paper like all one-liners do, but which is not always necessarily true.

Easter joy will come to us again this year, not because we are perfect in our practice of Lent, but because Jesus was perfect in His practice. The perfection in our practice then is not in the achievement of perfection per se, but is rather that we have disciplined ourselves to practice it in the first place.

This thought should provide a measure of good news on the first Sunday in March, because we are only three days from the beginning of the Lenten season, and we probably have invented a whole list of reasons why this is not a good time for us to begin the practice of discipline.

Perhaps we have weakly gone through the motions of Lenten discipline before giving up something just to say we did, anything really, as long as it was not too difficult or inconvenient for us, or removed us too far from the reality we crave.

Yet, even in having done so, we may have felt our weakened resolve being tested beyond our limits and our suffering more than we bargained for. If this is indeed true, we can be grateful for the disciplined practice of Jesus during His time of trial and waiting in the wilderness. We can be grateful that the best possible Lent has already been fully finished to completion by the only human in history who had no need for it.

In a few minutes, we are going to come to the Lenten communion table. We are going to stand up in our pews and step away from our *hubris* to come forward and humbly receive the perfect gift of life eternal from the perfect giver. The One who fasted at Lent so that we could feast at Easter.

In the coming days of the season of Lent, I challenge you to take some time to search your hearts and find whatever imperfection stands between you and God.

May it be a friendship, or a family relationship that is not Godly-give it up for Lent.

May it be sickness, or fear, or worry that is stealing your joy-give it up for Lent.

May it be an obsession with vanity, or money, or power, or fame-give it up for Lent.

Whatever it is, you can be sure that its roots will always be found in the pride of life-*Hubris*-give it up for Lent.

Doing this will require you to first practice some self-discipline by stepping away from *Hubris* toward humility.

For most of you, this will be a bold step of faith into your own wilderness that you must make alone. If you have the courage to take this step, you will find yourself face-to-face in deadly combat with your own demons sent by Satan straight from hell, and having only God's strength alone as your sword and defender.

But as you continue in your struggle, you will see your struggle more and more as His struggle, and as your struggle becomes His struggle, so too your fight will become His fight, even as you will see His victory at Easter become your victory for eternity.

My dear saints, God's gift of eternal life at Easter begins right here today in the wilderness of life at this table of Lenten bread and wine.

For those of us ready to receive this gift, victory is already nearer to us than it was when we began our worship service this morning, for "Behold, now is the acceptable time of God, today is the day of our salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray:

Father, today we boldly go forth into the wilderness of our world even as Jesus did before us. Let us now commune with you and with each other in faith and obedience, that your will might be done in us even as it was done in your Son our Lord Jesus Christ for the glory of God in heaven. Amen.