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St. John's Episcopal Church
1 Lent C10 / February 21 / Luke 4:1-13

“Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save...”

If ever there were a prayer to tuck inside our wallets ~ or stick under the frames of our bedroom mirrors so that we would see it and so that we would pray it *daily* during the season of Lent ~ *this* would certainly be that prayer. Because more so than any other season, the season of Lent affords Christians with a *wonderful* opportunity to strengthen and to deepen their relationship with God in much the same that our spiritual ancestors would do. Our spiritual forbearers would literally go out into the desert ~ they're actually called our desert mothers and desert fathers ~ they would to the desert in order to spend quality time with God. Their time in the desert was a time of prayerful self-examination, a time of fasting, a time to fine-tune their lives, so to speak ~ so that they could better hear *God's* voice above all other voices.

The season of Lent offers you and I that very same kind of opportunity. Lent gives us the opportunity to willingly choose to enter the “desert” ~ to incorporate into our lives acts of denial, self-examination, and fasting ~ so that we, too, can become more attuned to hearing the distinct voice of God over and above all the other voices that are vying for our attention...vying for our time...vying, really, for the very essence of our lives.

But whenever you and I go into the “desert” ~ whenever you respond to the Lenten invitation and decide to something special for the season ~ we will always, without fail, encounter temptation. Temptation, simply put, occurs *anytime* when you and I are presented with a choice. Because each choice in life that we are presented with is accompanied by a voice, is it not? Each choice that we are presented with in life comes with its own *advocate*. And the advocate’s job is to give us all the *reasons* as to why we should choose *this* option over all the other options that we are being presented with.

The good news is that the voice of the Holy Spirit is always one of those advocates. The good news is that the voice of the Holy Spirit will always be one of those voices vying for our attention saying, “Choose me! Choose God! Choose faith! Choose life!” The *bad* news, of course, is that the voice of the Holy Spirit is not the *only* voice that is vying for our attention. The Holy Spirit is not the only voice campaigning for the choices that we make in life. Jesus encountered that other voice in the desert; and so will we. Jesus was not immune to being tempted in the desert; and neither are we. And thus we pray:

“Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save...”

Remember: temptation is a *choice*. And each choice that we are presented with in life is accompanied by an advocating voice. Whereas the voice of the Holy Spirit

seeks to attune us to the will and workings of God, the devil uses *his* voice for the opposite reason. The devil uses his voice in order to persuade us to make choices which result in our *separation* from God and to distract us from our life's work to give God glory. With *that* knowledge in our heads and hearts, then, here we find ourselves this morning on the threshold of the Lenten season. The season officially began on Ash Wednesday when the Church, as a whole, was invited into a season of self-examination and repentance; the Church, as a whole, was invited to pray, fast, practice acts of self-denial, and to read and meditate on God's holy Word. Why? Because such actions help to strengthen our relationship with God, those actions help us to acknowledge our *dependence* upon God, those actions help us to distinguish God's voice in our lives, those actions help us know how to give God glory.

Yet at the very moment that the invitation to observe a holy Lent was issued... another voice entered the conversation. A voice which every person who received that invitation *heard*. A voice that sweetly, convincingly began trying to persuade us from making a choice which might result in our being brought into a closer relationship with God and to give God glory. Do you remember what the voice said? "You, ah...you really don't *need* to do this 'Lenten discipline' thing, you know? Lent...now who's bright idea was that? You've already got a pretty good relationship with God, right? You came to church today, didn't you? Well ~ that's a lot more than some other people did. Look around...I bet you can name *five* people who you

don't see here today. But *you're* here! Besides...you're an Episcopalian. Leave the Lenten disciplines to the *Catholics*. They really enjoy it..."

Why do we hear that voice telling us, suggesting to us, seeking to convince us not to do anything special in Lent? Why do we hear the voice telling us that it isn't necessary to go out into the desert and do anything that might help enhance our relationship with God? Because the devil doesn't want us to go there! And thus the devil will use *his* voice, in a most persuasive manner, to *keep* us from going there. And thus when a person chooses *that* voice as the one to listen to ~ the devil breathes a sigh of deep relief.

On the other hand ~ when people *do* choose to go out to the desert as a way of strengthening their relationship with God, the devil starts growing anxious. And as a result of that anxiety, he begins ratcheting up his rhetoric and we begin to hear his voice again: "So...you gave up your 3:00 afternoon cup of Dunkin' Donuts coffee for Lent...the cup you buy everyday before you pick up your three hyperactive children from school. How's that working for you? Hey, isn't that a Dunkin' Donuts gift card in the bottom of your purse? Think there's any money left on it? I know a way you could find out... I know, I know, you made a promise, no Dunkin' Donuts coffee for Lent...hey, isn't that a Starbucks on the next corner...?"

The temptation, of course ~ the choice that we find ourselves being presented with while in the "desert" is whether to keep our Lenten discipline or quit! To stay in the desert or leave prematurely. The devil, of course, wants us to leave! ~ quickly!

And he knows that if he can convince us to *break* our Lenten discipline that the chances are very good that we will see ourselves as *failures*; that the chances are very good that we won't ask God for forgiveness and begin again; and the combination of those two things will convince us to quit and leave the desert before our time! And when that happens? ~ the devil once again breathes a sigh of deep relief.

However, when the devil *fails* ~ when we stick to our Lenten practices and stay in the desert; or, when we confess to God when we do fail and choose to remain in the desert; ~ then the devil grows even *more* anxious. If he can't keep us from observing Lent ~ and if he can't keep us from quitting our Lenten practices ~ then the devil will seek to contain the damage. The devil will convince us not to include what Rev. Molly referred to in her Ash Wednesday sermon as the all important *missing ingredient* in many Lenten practices ~ namely, the ingredient of using our Lenten practices as a way of giving glory to God.

For instance, Molly said that many Christians may give up going to the movies, they may give up drinking wine or eating deserts ~ but unless Christians are taking the money that they would have *spent* on those things and are giving that money away ~ in whatever manner and to whatever entity that would rightfully bring glory to God ~ then the sacrifice is not complete. Even if a Christian chooses to sacrifice their time and take on more Bible reading, unless that Christian is willing to somehow share and put into practice what they have learned as a way of giving glory to God...then the sacrifice is not complete. Enter again, once more, the voice of the devil who is now

growing ever anxious; the devil who, like I said, is seeking to contain the damage and is not wishing us to spread it. “They want you to do *what?* Oh, my gosh! Is it not *enough* that you are giving up something that you love? I mean, does she really know how much you love ice cream? Is not the *pain* of your sacrifice sufficient unto itself? Sure, you’ve saved a lot of money because you haven’t bought anything from Ben & Jerry’s for the past six weeks...but you know, Easter is coming. And you’re going to need that money to buy LOTS of ice cream to keep the cows in Vermont employed. Don’t you even *think* of giving the money to a food pantry ~ they’ll be fine. Other people will take care of them. You better focus on *you*. Because you know, the season of Lent...Lent is a time for just God and you and *no one else...*”

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It’s always better to keep the devil anxious. It’s always better to keep the devil having to continually look for a more opportune time. Because anxious voices are voices that are much more easily recognizable in life. It’s never a good thing to give the devil an opportunity to breath sighs of relief. Because when we do that, his voice just blends in with all the others. And we lose the distinctiveness of the voice of Life.

Therefore ~ I wish to encourage all of us this Lent to follow the example of Jesus, to follow the example of our ancestors, and to go out and spend some time in the Lenten desert. Go there and go there *willingly* and with joy in your heart! Go

there *knowing* that you will encounter the voice of the tempter. Expect it! But go there also knowing ~ and also *expecting* ~ to encounter the voice of the Holy Spirit. A voice that is ever willing to comfort you, encourage you ~ strengthen you and guide you ~ a voice that will assure you of God's constant love for you ~ a voice that is inviting you into a deeper relationship with God and hoping that you will answer.