

✠ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

**Last** Sunday we heard the Transfiguration of Jesus — the resplendence, radiance, and glory of Christ, and how his glory is inseparable from his suffering. And that the only way for Christ to return to his glory was *through* his suffering and death.

For Jesus came to *transfigure* not just water into wine, not just his face and clothes into glory for a moment, but to *transfigure* Death into Life forever — for Death will soon be no more. But not yet. And until the day that either we die or Death dies, we are to remain steadfast in the faith.

Remaining steadfast in faith does not take zero effort. None of the apostles took for granted that faith would flourish without preparation, without endurance, without encouragement, without warnings and exhortations, without worship, without suffering.

And that leads us nicely into this season of Lent. What we know as Lent, began as early as the fourth century, just after the Council of Nicaea of 325AD. Forty days of preparation — including fasting — were set aside particularly for new converts before their baptism on Easter Sunday. But this practice spread even beyond baptismal candidates.

**When** we take this season of Lent for what it is — a season of penitence and preparation, instead of just going through the motions or letting it pass us by — it becomes easy to see why it was adopted by the Church. The Church Calendar as a whole—and this Lenten season in particular—is formative, further shaping us into disciples.

Now I didn't grow up on the Church Calendar — I knew about Advent and Lent and Christmas, but that was about it. In fact, from the outside looking in, our Calendar can look strange, unusual, foreign. But then again, what sacred thing *doesn't* look that way?

I think what is so compelling about Ash Wednesday, about Lent, about Holy Week — like I mentioned in the newsletter — is simply that I cannot imagine a better alternative. It's true that we could simply do none of it. We could skip the Church calendar altogether. We could avoid Advent and Lent and Epiphany and Pentecost altogether. But at what price? What would we be missing out on? Is there a better alternative?

There seem to be two alternatives. One is the route of the non-denominational churches, and that's to simply pick a topic or Scripture or series and do that. There are times, of course, when a series is an excellent thing to do. But I don't think this seriously holds up as a better alternative for good; because it's always individualistic—every church, every pastor, doing what they see fit. I'm not saying it's always bad, just that it's never communal.

The second is the Presbyterian tradition — they tend to walk through a whole book of the Bible, verse-by-verse, chapter-by-chapter, sometimes taking up to ten years to preach through a book. I think that's commendable, and a legitimate alternative.

But both alternatives nevertheless miss out on the cadence of re-hearing our Lord's life each year — the expectation of his coming in Advent, his birth at Christmas, his revelation as the Son of God throughout Epiphany, his endurance throughout Lent, his sacrifice in Holy Week, and his gift of the Holy Spirit throughout Pentecost. Each year, we re-hear the gospel through the liturgy, because the good news is Jesus himself — he came to do and to be what man could not — to give up his life as a sacrifice, to give us his Life as a gift.

In other words, the Church Calendar at its core is *personal* and *relational*. Every year we are invited to get to know who our Lord is, what he has done for us, and who he has called us to be.

**O**n Ash Wednesday, we heard more about who our Lord Jesus has called us to be. Our Lord Jesus taught on giving, praying, fasting, treasure. We heard that Jesus assumed that those who heard him were giving, praying, and fasting, for this is how he spoke to the crowds from the mountaintop:

*When you give. When you pray. When you fast.*

This congregation, as I said on Ash Wednesday, is a generous and a praying congregation, and I thank God for that. But I suspect that we are weak on fasting. We are therefore missing out on a treasure of our faith.

And so, fast. Fast because our Lord assumes we will. Fast because our ancestors Adam and Eve should have fasted from that fruit in the Garden, but did not. Fast because doing so in the body can indeed nurture our soul. Fasting isn't about dieting, but about re-ordering our desires, comforts, and pleasures.

And to get at this, I used the metaphor of the Desires Vending Machine. Every press of the button on that Desires or Pleasures or Comforts Vending Machine gives us the treasure of this life. And then it is immediately spent and gone, and still our desires and pleasures pull at us, try to convince us that we need more news, more social media, more drink, more shopping, more comfort. It will never be enough. Always it will seek more from us, and no matter how much we give in, it will never be enough.

And at the end of all of that, what will we have to show for it? What will we have sacrificed by giving into these pleasures and comforts and desires instead of spending our mind, our money, and our time differently?

*20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21*

We want to use the spiritual discipline of fasting this Lent as if it's a mechanic or a programmer working on our Desire Vending Machine. We want to change, in other words, *what* we desire. Or, to fully let the secret out, we want to change *who* we desire. We want to discipline our bodies so that we desire Jesus and the kinds of things he desires for us.

*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

**T**his morning we heard the wonderful story of David defeating Goliath. It's a story that has the feel of a fairy tale — a monster is defeated by an unlikely hero. You might be surprised that I'm calling him a monster, but just listen to how the men of Israel reacted when they saw and heard Goliath:

*[24] All the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him and were much afraid. (1 Samuel 17:24, ESV)*

That sounds like a monster to me. Now fairy tales, as GK Chesterton puts it, is not to introduce children to monsters, for they — same as us — already know that monsters are real. The beauty of fairy tales, he says, is so that children learn that monsters can be defeated:

*What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon.*

Of course, not every monster looks like a dragon, or like Goliath. Some hide their ugliness, their evil, very well. This is just what St. Paul tells us:

*[14] And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. [15] So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. (2 Corinthians 11:14–15, ESV)*

In any case, here we have the trappings of a fairy tale, a monster, Goliath — and a boy, David — who defeated the monster. The sweetest thing about this fairy tale is that it's true: David was a boy. And David did kill Goliath.

What was David's secret? How did he do it?

The first thing to notice is that he had the opportunity to defeat Goliath. He shouldn't have had this opportunity. He had seven brothers, all older, who were at the battle. None of them took up Goliath's challenge. But neither

did Saul, who was said to be a head taller than all the men of Israel. What kind of king cowers in fear before a monster? Surely not a king worthy of the crown.

No one else — not Saul, the tall, strong King; not David's brothers — took up the challenge. So, David did.

What makes Goliath so monstrous is that he comes against God's people in the name of his own gods. He neither respects God nor God's people. And that is always a recipe — as we have been learning in our study of Daniel — for downfall.

What makes David the hero is not the confidence he has in himself, though as shepherd, he has killed both bear and lion. But rather, what makes David the hero is that he cannot stand that the monster and his army are taunting God and his people. He cannot stomach the Lord's name taken in vain. He cannot stomach God's promises being laughed at. And he cannot let his own people suffer in fear for a moment longer. What David does is vindicate God's name and vindicate God's people.

David challenged Goliath not for glory, but to make sure the name of the Lord is known — both to his people and among his enemies.

We know this story as David defeating Goliath, but we could equally — and perhaps even more accurately — call this story David treasuring the Lord. For that is what this *true* fairy tale is really about.

**N**OW to the Temptation of Jesus. Jesus had already fasted for forty days and nights. He was hungry, and the tempter came. The tempter tries three temptations: bread, the care of angels, and the kingdoms of the world.

Let's take them in turn.

**1st.** The first temptation appears to be simply about bread. Jesus has not eaten for forty days and forty nights. He is obviously hungry, famished, starving. There's no question that he needs food. There's no question, too, that Jesus can command the stones to become bread.

But then again, if that's all that was needed, if all Jesus needed to do was to tell the stones to become bread, then he could have *already* done that. He could have turned stone or sand in the wilderness into manna at any point already in those forty days. Indeed, Jesus later will perform a similar miracle — he will turn a few loaves of bread into enough bread to feed thousands.

What's at the heart of this temptation? Satan is trying to get Jesus to trade his identity for his hunger. Satan begins with that preeminently snakey, wicked word: "If." Everything that comes after that word is about breaking his identity, breaking the Son's trust of his Father, trying to get Jesus to doubt his identity as God's Son.

Yes, Jesus could command the stone to become bread. But he hasn't, and doing so now would be at the cost of doubting that he is the Son of God. Just forty days before, Jesus heard God's voice in heaven saying: "This is my well-beloved Son." He will continue to trust his father, and he turns to the Scripture that's about *trusting the Father*:

*"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

And the word that came from the mouth of God was "This is my well-beloved Son." Jesus will not doubt his Father's word.

**2nd.** The second temptation appears to be about the privileges of the Son of God. The first temptation was about what Jesus needed as a man. The second temptation is about the privileges Jesus has as the Son of God. For the angels are truly there to protect, care for, and minister to the Son of God.

What's at the heart of this temptation? This temptation is a second attack on the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. Whereas the first temptation focused on a real human need—hunger and food—this temptation is about the privileges of his divinity. The angels are there for him.

But again, at what cost would Jesus deploy the angels? For what purpose would he use them? For doubting his Father? No, that is far too high a price to pay. He is his Father's Son—nothing can change that. Nor is there any need to prove it. And so he parries:

*You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.*

**3rd.** The third temptation is about the mission of Jesus. This is why Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offers them to him—at the exceedingly terrible price of devil worship. If only Jesus would bow down and worship the devil, the devil would give him all the kingdoms.

We do need to understand that the mission of Jesus—again, as we have been learning in our Daniel Bible Study—is to be the everlasting king of the everlasting kingdom. He will rule over all. That is why he has come. And we know the whole world *needs* the rule of Jesus.

But the price that Satan offers is monstrously, terribly high — it would instead bring about the rule of Satan's evil kingdom forever. It would be the worst thing that could happen to everyone ever all of the time.

What's at the heart of this temptation? Satan offers Jesus a trick, as if worshipping Satan is the way to achieve rule over these kingdoms. And so, Jesus banishes Satan:

*“Be gone, Satan! For it is written,  
“You shall worship the Lord your God  
and him only shall you serve.”*”

The devil departs. The angels come and minister to Jesus.

**We** have seen what is at the heart of these temptations, that Satan tries to get Jesus to forget his Father's voice, to doubt his identity as the Son of God, to conjure up food or angels or worship at the cost of his love for God. But whereas we falter, fail, and flounder, Jesus remains steadfast in his love for God, in his love for his people, and in his mission to save the world *through suffering and through death*.

And so, we are at last ready to ask the question to which we've been building towards: Was Jesus at his weakest or his strongest after those forty days of fasting in the wilderness? Was Jesus at his weakest or was Jesus at his strongest?

By every outward measure we would first think that Jesus is at his weakest. He is famished, starving, parched, dehydrated; his body is extraordinarily weakened. Who knows how well he could even move or talk?

But by every inward measure he is at his strongest. For his fasting for forty days and nights did not weaken him, but was the very preparation which made him ready to withstand Satan. He had already faced every doubt and every temptation as hungered for forty days. What was a little more hunger, after all that? What was a little more weakness? What was a little more suffering?

So, too, we are not at our strongest when we have prepared by our own capacities, but rather when we are completely reliant upon God. St. Paul puts it this way: “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

*[10] For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10, ESV)*

So, too, we will find that the Lenten discipline of fasting *strengthens* us—and strengthens us especially when we are hungry, exhausted, or stretched to the limit. For then, we shall find that Christ was, is, and always will be our strength.

**Christ** the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever. **Amen and amen.**