

**St. Paul's Anglican Church**  
**1st Sunday in Lent; March 10, 2019**  
**Matthew 4:1 to 13**

**The Rev. Father Tom Burr**

The Season of Lent began on Wednesday when many of us gathered for the reading of the Litany and Penitential Office, for Holy Communion and the imposition of ashes. Many Christians view Lent as a time to “give up something”, a time for fasting. How many of us remember our parents telling us something like this, “Why don’t you give up candy for Lent, since you will probably receive a huge chocolate bunny on Easter?” How many have repeated this “suggestion” to our own children?

Teaching children to fast during Lent is a wonderful way to prepare them to be disciplined in all walks of life. In the beginning, the focus of their fasting may be “THE BUNNY”, but over time they can be taught that, in addition to doing without something, it is good to focus on developing a closer, more loving relationship with Jesus Christ and our neighbors.

For adults, fasting should always be a spiritually rewarding discipline; but this does not happen automatically, we need to pray and practice. There were times in the not too distant past when I managed to forego desserts for the entire Lenten Season. This was difficult, and I did gain spiritually from this discipline, but I must confess, often I focused more on the weight I was losing than on the spiritual growth I should be gaining.

This seems to be the case in ancient Israel described by Isaiah in our Old Testament reading (Isa. 58). Israel and Judah were fearful of the coming invasion by foreign powers. Isaiah had warned them of the consequences of their impending doom because of their sin, and had urged them to offer sincere and humble repentance to God.

Instead of heeding his warning they complained to God,  
**Why have we fasted, and you do not see it? Why have we**

**humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?** God acknowledged they did seek Him daily, but said **in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure. Fasting like yours will not make your voice heard on high.** They were just half-heartedly going through the motions of repentance; they were not seeking godly wisdom. After all, God had heard them often in past dire circumstances, so their focus was on past deliverances (the chocolate rabbit), and on unfounded current expectations (the excess weight they would lose). Effective fasting as a devotion to God requires faithful living.

Centuries later our Savior is on the scene, and in our gospel reading (Matt. 4:1-13), He gives the world a perfect example of proper Christian fasting. Our Lord has just received the baptism of John the Baptist in the Jordan River; and as He came out of the water, the Father's voice was heard from heaven saying, **This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.** We believe this is when Jesus became fully aware of his mission to save the world and his unique relationship with God the Father.

The reading begins with Jesus being led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where He fasts for 40 days. He has a lot to consider. Unlike his ancestors in the Old Testament reading, He will remain faithful to God's will; He will not yield to the will of the masses who are seeking a military leader, or fall prey to Satan's temptations.

Satan saw this as an opportune time to tempt our Lord to use his divine powers to display flamboyant feats in the spirit of sensationalism in order to gain worldly goods, fame or power. Throughout the gospels, we see that Jesus did not perform miracles to impress people: He did them as a sign of his divinity and because of his compassion for the sick, the poor and the hungry.

He was hungry; He had fasted 40 days, so Satan tempted Him to **command these stones be made bread.** Our Lord expressed his devotion to the Father when he replied, **Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.** A right relationship with God is of utmost

importance in our lives, but how can providing food for the hungry be wrong, or evil? I am sure Eve was hungry when the devil tempted her to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden; and we all know how that turned out!

Then Satan took Jesus to the highest point of the House of God, the Temple, which is on the highest hill in Jerusalem. And he said, **If you are the Son of God, jump;** because it is written in Scripture that angels would protect Him. Our Lord reminded the evil one that it is also written in Scripture, **you shall not tempt the Lord your God.**

Satan's final attempt was to offer Him all the kingdoms of this world, great power, if He would **fall down and worship him.** This is where Jesus made it very clear who He would serve, and who we must choose to serve, **it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.**

Fasting can be a wonderful and rewarding spiritual discipline if in addition to doing without something, we focus on God, and developing a closer, more loving fellowship with Jesus Christ and our neighbors.

Kelly, a young mom who lives in Edmond, Oklahoma, was thinking about Lent, which was just days away, when an errant driver caused her to slam on her brakes. Without thinking, a few nasty words slid right off her tongue. She had been thinking it was time to undergo a more meaningful Lenten sacrifice, and when she heard her three-year-old son echo those same nasty words, she knew what it would be.

She would replace her bad habit of cursing with the good habit of praying for the person or situation that had upset her. As a reminder of her commitment to replace a bad habit with a good one, every time she cursed, she put \$1 into her Lent Swear Jar. She had a successful Lenten season; she replaced cursing with praying. A side benefit is that, at \$1 per cursing episode, she donated \$52 to a homeless shelter.

We will probably not replace a bad habit with a godly one immediately; it takes prayer and practice, but I am sure we will

have “successes” along the way; and when we do, we should give thanks and praise to God for his strengthening.

In the epistle (2 Cor. 6:1-10), St. Paul gives us tangible examples of focusing on God and developing a closer, more loving fellowship with Jesus Christ and our neighbors. First, he warns the believers in Corinth not to **receive the grace of God in vain**. By saying **now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation**, he attempts to instill in them a sense of urgency. They have received the promise of everlasting life by God’s grace through their faith, so now it is time to show their devotion to God, now it is time practice faithful living.

Then he gives examples of a right relationship with our Savior. By maintaining his focus on heavenly matters in his service to God, he was able to resist temptations and endure **afflictions, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments and in fasting**, without losing sight of why he serves.

Paul shows the power of the Holy Spirit is evident in two contradictions when he said that the apostles are **as dying, and, behold, we live** and **as having nothing, yet possess all things**. They, and all of us, will suffer a physical death, it is the next step in living; but our right living can clearly teach the power of Christ’s resurrection to eternal life. (As dying, and behold, we live!) And, though we may possess little in the way of tangible, worldly assets, through God’s promise of eternal life, we possess heavenly things, we possess everything of eternal value.

So, let us have a successful Lenten season; let us call on the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in each of our hearts, and deny Satan’s temptations; and let us replace a bad habit with a godly one. In our fasting discipline this year, let us model the power of Christ’s resurrection to the world, by focusing on God, and developing a closer, more loving fellowship with Jesus Christ and our neighbors.

Now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, power, dominion, and glory, both now and evermore. Amen.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.