



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Deborah A. Lee, *Associate Rector for Discipleship & Community*

## Temptation and Transformation

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 1, 2020*

*The First Sunday in Lent*

*Based on Matthew 4:1-11*

*Let us pray: Gracious God, as Lent begins anew, come in your mercy to cleanse us, restore us, and make new hearts within us. In the Name of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier...Amen.*

There is something so very curious about that man from Galilee. Jesus has captivated the imaginations of people throughout twenty centuries. He transcends time and place, culture and custom, race and language. There is something in him that speaks clearly to us. We see it throughout the gospels, everywhere he went, in what he said and did. We know he became one of us. In the gospel today we see him struggling with the things he faced in the wilderness. And, as he finds the way for himself, he finds the way for us as well.

Throughout the scriptures, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God's next move, a place of learning to trust in God's mercy. For forty days and nights Jesus remained in the wilderness getting ready for what would come next. For us, today marks the first Sunday in the season of Lent, which commemorates Christ's own time of fasting in the wilderness and the temptations he faced from Satan.

It might be tempting for us to skip Lent—often we just don't know what to do about this season. *"What do I give up?"* seems to be the primary question.

Want to know a temptation for me in the wilderness that is New York City? Every day for the past two weeks when I've emerged from the subway at 51<sup>st</sup> street, I've passed by that post-Valentine's Day, 50% off sale sign in the window at the Godiva store, and I hear, "Go for it, girl! You *deserve* that chocolate! You're a New Yorker, now!" Folks, the struggle is real.

But Lent isn't a time to slim down or to save money by not buying chocolate. Too easily our resolutions begin to look like holy variations on New Year's resolutions, and, well, we know how long they last! For so many of us the first things we think of when we hear the word "Lent" are suffering and guilt. "A time to shame ourselves for how terrible we are." I think Lent has been officially labeled the biggest downer of the year.

But what I want to say to you today is that Lent is not primarily about any of those things I just mentioned. Instead, it is more about one thing: transformation. The apostle Paul urges us to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds..." Lent is an opportunity to invite God to put a fresh newness and awareness within us; to be changed from the inside out in all we do and think; to allow God to bring

the best out of us and to develop our maturity. And if you take advantage of this opportunity, you'll have deeper and richer reasons to celebrate when Easter arrives.

Yes, Lent is a penitential season of introspection to examine habits that may be destructive to our becoming who God in Christ would have us be. As such, it can be characterized as a season of spiritual spring cleaning: clearing out baggage that we all hoard in our spirits, minds, and souls. It's a time for taking spiritual inventory and then releasing what may be stumbling blocks, in our relationships with one another and with Jesus. As Pope Francis observed, "Lent comes providentially to reawaken us, to shake us from our lethargy."

Can we re-imagine Lent, not as a time solely focused on sacrifice and denial, but as a time of preparation and anticipation—preparation for the work to which God calls us and anticipation of the fullness of life that God promises? Can we re-imagine Lent as a time of transformation?

In Dean's sermon last week he quoted questions that were posed by Adam Hamilton, the senior pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. When I heard them I immediately thought, "Ahhh...those are *Lenten* questions! How perfect!" Questions such as:

1. Who are we?
2. What do we believe?
3. Why do we gather together here on a Sunday?
4. Who is Jesus to me?
5. Why does he matter?
6. What does it mean to be a Christian working towards justice in our communities and in our world?

When Jesus went off into the wilderness, he spent forty days asking himself the question of what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves. As theologian Fredrick Buechner writes, "To hear yourself try to answer questions like these, is to begin to hear something not only of *who* you are, but of ... what you are becoming."<sup>1</sup>

Lent's forty days can be a time to use questions like these to prepare ourselves for transformation. And it begins with our parish of St. Bart's, in how our community of the faithful intends to spend Lent together, and in the ways our parish reaches out to the world.

The thing about transformation, though, is that it takes risk; you won't be able to play it safe. Jesus' transformation in the wilderness did not come without the risk of encountering temptation. He was in the wilderness—hungry and vulnerable. And the Tempter swooped in. In our desire to serve God and to live as Jesus did—to live a transformed life—there will be temptations. Jesus was tempted to abandon his chosen mission, to use all his power for himself, to trust in himself alone. Our temptations may be different, or they may not be. But the reality is the same. There will always be ways in which attractions—other than the way of Jesus—will try to claim and demand our focus and activity.

Thomas Merton, in his book *The Wisdom of the Desert*, tells a story concerning Abbot John, a monk. Abbot John prayed to the Lord that all passion, craving, and desire be taken from him. His prayer was granted. He became impassable, able to withstand and resist all enticements. In this condition he went to one of the elders and said, "You see before you a man who is completely at rest and has no more temptations." The elder's response to Abbot John was surprising. Instead of praising him the elder solemnly said, "Go and pray to the Lord to command some struggle to be stirred up in you, for the soul is matured only in battles." Reluctantly, yet in obedience to his elder, Abbot John did this and when the temptations started up again this time he did not pray that the struggle be taken away from him. Instead he prayed, "Lord, give me strength to get through the fight."

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, 1993

As one scholar writes, “The promise of the gospel is that the one who is ‘with you always, even to the end of the age’—Jesus—has already gone ahead of his followers, even to the most forsaken places of the wilderness; he meets them in the most difficult tests of their own lives. No place is so desolate, so distant, or so challenging that Jesus has not already been there; no test or temptation is so great that Jesus has not already overcome it.”<sup>2</sup> The struggle may be real, but we are not alone in the struggle.

Might we allow Lent to be a time where we face struggles and temptations, not in our own power, not afraid of what may come, but in anticipation of who God is shaping and transforming us to be during these 40 days? For, as the apostle Paul tells the Philippians— and us—God who began the good work within us will keep right on helping us grow in grace until God’s task within us is finally finished on that day when Jesus Christ returns.

The struggle may remain, but all the while we can confidently pray, “Lord, give us strength to get through the fight.” May Lent be a time when God’s redeeming work within us transforms every one of us and our parish.

Amen.

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write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)

325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022

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<sup>2</sup> West, Audrey, *workingpreacher.org*