

Today is the First Sunday in Lent; for the next five weeks—and during Holy Week after that, we'll be focusing on God's love expressed for us in Jesus' life and, more particularly, in his death. Always, on this First Sunday, we hear the same story from Jesus' life, but each year there's a different version: the first year from Matthew, the second Mark, the third Luke. This story takes place right after Jesus' baptism and just before his public ministry begins. What's the story? The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness by the devil (who is also called "Satan" or "the tempter"). In Matthew and Luke, the devil presents three temptations: bread and protection and power. In Mark, however, there are no details as to how the devil tempts Jesus; all we hear in Mark is this: "And the Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him." In Mark, we don't know exactly what temptation Satan offered.

Regardless of what the temptation was, Jesus was tempted, and his temptation is one of the ways we know that he was human, because he was capable of choosing good—or evil, just as you and I are. Whenever he was tested, he chose good over evil, giving us a model for resisting temptation. Jesus was tested repeatedly, when evil spirits confronted him, when he encountered someone who needed healing on the sabbath, when he was accused of blasphemy, when he was criticized by the religious leaders, and, especially, when he faced his suffering and death.

You and I encounter temptation repeatedly as well. Maybe, at some time in your life, you've encountered a grand temptation: to cheat at work, to break a marriage vow, to drive while under the influence. Maybe you triumphed over the temptation, or maybe you succumbed. But probably more often the temptations you face are less dramatic. And your temptations are probably quite different from mine, and from those of others. One is tempted to selfishness, another to give up self for a husband or a boss. One is tempted to peek at a fellow student's exam for an answer, another to hide income to evade taxes. One is tempted to speak a harsh word, another to remain silent in the face of injustice. Daily, in many ways, you and I are presented with choices, to act for good or for ill; each of us then decides, in each circumstance, how to act. Sometimes you succeed in acting for good, and sometimes you fail. When you succeed, God rejoices, and, hopefully, you build up your "decision-making muscles" and your "putting-choice-into-action muscles." When you fail, God forgives you and gives you another chance to stretch and flex and build those muscles.

During Lent this year, I'm inviting you to build up your spiritual muscles. How? To consider your own struggles with temptation, whatever they are. To be alert to the spiritual dangers you face. To resolve to resist those dangers. To practice making choices for good. And to put those choices into action. I've prepared a guide for you, which you will receive after communion; if it's helpful, take it home.

Last week I explained that, throughout the season of Lent, we will confess our sin, not at the beginning of the service, as we usually do, but near the end of the service, after we have affirmed our

baptism at the font, after we have heard God's word of grace in the sermon, and after we have tasted God's grace at the table. I'm inviting you, once you are assured of God's love through baptism and preaching and Eucharist—and only then, only when you see yourself in the light of God's love rather than in the darkness of your failure—I'm inviting you to be honest with yourself, to consider your failures, and to turn back to God to make specific choices for good in your life. My purpose is not to cause you to feel guilty or to discourage you by pointing out the chasm between your actions and God's expectations of you. Rather, I'm aiming to fill you up with an experience of God's love so you can take courage to consider how best to amend your life, to turn away from self-defeating habits—and toward God's infinite patience and perseverance and power.

I'll give you an example. Here's my Lenten intention to amend my life. I'm focusing on keeping sabbath. I work hard, six days a week, for you and for the people of Grace and, on the bishop's behalf, for nine other congregations in Rockland, Sullivan, and Orange Counties. On the seventh day (for me, Friday) I take my sabbath, my day off. On that day, dedicated to self-renewal, I enjoy activities that are life-giving for me: taking care of the garden in the summer and the houseplants in the winter; taking a walk; doing yoga; sharing a meal with a friend; putting up decorations for a holiday; going to Temple Beth Jacob to worship in a place where I have no responsibility. I also avoid some things: working on church matters, opening email, attending to texts slavishly (although I do check them periodically in case someone has an emergency), and driving.

Recently I've become aware that my sabbath doesn't feel very restful or renewing. I'm usually trying to catch up on cleaning or laundry or sifting through mail or trying to figure out what bills need to be paid, and I've found myself feeling tired and crabby. So I've been thinking about living more faithfully by keeping sabbath more judiciously, and here's what I've realized: I need to move housekeeping and bill-paying tasks off of Fridays. I need to create another time during the week when I can take care of those important matters—and leave Friday open for practices that provide renewal and restoration. I need to amend my life for the sake of my life!

Is there some amendment you need to make in your life? Is there a habit that prevents you from living fully—or something that causes harm or stress, to yourself or others? Maybe you're stuck in grief over a loved one's death, looking backward to your loss and unable to move forward. Maybe you're addicted to nicotine or cocaine or heroin or alcohol and are beginning to experience the consequences of your abuse. Maybe you're finding yourself being mean, most of the time, even though you don't intend to be. Maybe you've become an expert in catastrophic thinking, always ruminating about the worst possible thing that could happen in every situation. Maybe you are bothered with thoughts about harming yourself. Maybe you're incapacitated by trauma from early childhood or a sexual assault in your teens or during military combat or on the job. Maybe you're eating too much—or not eating enough vegetables—or not sleeping well—or ignoring a physical symptom of illness because you don't want to go to the doctor. Maybe you are becoming less and less able to hear anyone else's viewpoint.

What is there, in your life, in need of amendment? What is there that prevents you from living fully? I'm inviting you, in this season, to ask these questions. If you choose to participate, there's only

one rule. The point is not to become incapacitated by guilt over something you have done—or failed to do. “Amendment of Life” (or its other name, “Repentance”) begins, not with your sinfulness or your failure, but instead with your identity as a beloved child of God, forgiven and freed. Repenting begins with turning back to God for grace and mercy. It continues with your choice to amend your behavior, and it concludes with your new behavior.

My dear friends in Christ, God longs for you to live fully, and, even if you have made bad choices—or really, really bad choices, God has no interest in punishing you or causing you suffering. God, who desires only goodness for you, is waiting for you to turn toward God, is ready to receive your confession and your desire to amend your life, to forgive you, and then to give you the patience and perseverance and power to move forward. AMEN