

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, Year C, 21.it.2007, 19:30  
Saint Paul-Lebanon Ev. Luth. Church / Felton, Pennsylvania  
Imposition of Ashes with Holy Communion  
Psalm 51, Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Psalm 91:1-2,9-10, Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13



Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who  
was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

--Luke 4:1-2

Today we, with the whole Western Church, begin the penitential season of Lent. Our ancestors began this day at this very time of year, a time when food was scarce and still is for millions, in sackcloth and ashes, eating nothing all day until after sundown. We have shed the sackcloth, but retained the ashes, a sign of our mortality and of the passing away of all living beings in this world. In our society, the practice of cremation

of the dead is becoming more and more familiar, adding an additional poignancy to this symbolic rite.

The season of Lent is to be observed as a time of fasting, that is, as a time of deliberate self-denial. That may take the form of giving more time for others and keeping less of it for ourselves. For those of us who obviously have not had to miss any meals we needed, Lenten fasting should also include an actual fast from food or an ordinary portion of our daily meals, such as dessert. In following this discipline, we not only attend to our health but we who have everything we need experience what it means to do without.

Our 40-day Lenten fast is based on the 40-day fast of Jesus. His fast in the wilderness was

based on Israel's forty-year sojourn in the Sinai desert following the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. There, the Hebrews were tempted to return to the tyranny of slavery and to the gods of Egypt just so that they could have food, water for drinking and washing and something more than a tent for shelter. We can see those temptations of the Hebrews, and the trials of Moses, their leader, in the temptations of Our Lord in the desert following His baptism by John. He is tempted through *hunger*, as the devil tempts Him with bread, through the experience of powerlessness, as the devil tempts Him with *worldly power*, and through arrogant spiritual *pride verging on despair*, as the devil tempts Him to use the pinnacle of the Temple in a suicide attempt.

Hunger, the will to power and arrogant pride which conceals a loss of hope are forces as powerful as any storm, and they rock the world we live in daily. Millions upon millions go hungry in a world that has the capacity to feed itself many times over—the millions of neighbors around the world and close to home whom we will remember in our Lenten offerings to Bread for the World and Red Lion Community Services—while the well-fed experience an inner emptiness from having everything and not knowing anything or anyone worth desiring; both the truly hungry and the spiritually hungry grab at the first morsel or the latest novelty to fill their emptiness, giving no thought to the coming generation. Many of those third-world millions dying from starvation are

deprived of food and development the first world would give them by those whose will to earthly power makes them claim all material and human resources in their various wars of liberation, even enslaving children as soldiers and terrorists. Such men, and also the leaders of corporations and nations who look past such suffering in stiff-necked pride, would not be able to point to a power beyond themselves as their source of hope, and they would laugh at the religious question itself because they so fear it. Succumbing to these temptations of hunger, the will to power and despair masquerading as pride, the world goes on as it has from the dawn of time, erupting from time to time in war, barely noticing that time is running out, not only in each of our brief span of days, but also in the time

left for our species to reverse the damage we have done to ourselves and our world.

Into this world and this humanity, prone to these very temptations, the living God Who is completely other than this world He has created chooses, in a paradox that can be neither explained nor explained away, to be born, to live and even to die. In His three temptations in today's Gospel, He experiences what we experience, that to which our world continually succumbs, but with a difference. Like ancient Israel, freed from slavery, He is led by the Holy Spirit into a wilderness of temptation, taking even less with Him than the provisions the freed Hebrew slaves carried on their backs across the Sea of Reeds into Sinai. In Him, our humanity is tested. In Him

our humanity stands open before God, looking to God as the ultimate giver of good and of life. In Him, our humanity bears hunger without panic, powerlessness without rebellion, death itself without despair.

We know today about Israel's Exodus from Egypt only because, in the face of all temptations and setbacks, the Hebrew slaves became free Israelites again, transformed through their trust in the living God. We read and hear of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness only because He resisted them, strong only in His trust in His Heavenly Father, and because that trust was vindicated beyond death in His rising from the dead, proclaimed until the end of time in His Church.

May the same Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son lead you by faith into this season of Lenten fasting and the suffering of Our Lord with all the living with hope, and may the same Holy and life-giving Spirit lead you beyond these forty days to the miracle of Easter with joy. ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠ Amen.

S. D. G. !

