

**“Sharing the Sense of Wholeness and Hope that Comes from God”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church  
for Sunday, February 14, 2016

Lent 1

Scripture Readings: Psalm 91 (VU #807)

Luke 4:1-13

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

It is a question that I am often asked – at least in recent years. It was never something I thought about when I was growing up. In fact, I can remember the first time I heard the question, some 35 or 40 years ago. On this one bad day I thought it was the beginning of the end – the very fact that I could not answer the question might be proof that I could not function in my chosen profession, because the question simply made no sense to me.

It may be a question you have heard often as well: “What are you giving up for Lent?”

Somehow that tradition of giving something up for Lent by-passed my family, and it was not emphasized in my church experience, either. Lent was never about what I should give up, although for many people Lent is associated with giving something up as commonly as establishing New Year’s resolutions is associated with January 1<sup>st</sup>.

I am not meaning to be critical of those who do carry on that tradition, and who make a point of giving something up for Lent. I just never got the meaning of it.

Now there is a sense that we can identify with the pain, suffering, and rejection of Jesus only if we have an experience similar to him. Sacrificing for Lent is an attempt to do just that. But somehow giving up potatoes or wine or chocolates or ice cream or desserts in general hardly seems to me like identifying with the suffering of Jesus.

If I was expected to give something up, I knew what it would be as a kid: I would gladly give up liver and Brussels sprouts. These would have been good things to give up – I never wanted to eat them in the first place but if I gave them up, then I would have a religious reason to say “no” to them whenever my mother cooked them.

That can be the problem with “giving up” something – we give up what we do not want in the first place.

As I said, this is not meant to criticize people who do make sacrifices of what may be special and enjoyed by them for a higher spiritual goal during Lent – I simply do not fully appreciate the practice for myself.

Turning toward the temptation of the devil toward Jesus, the challenge is three-fold – turn anything into food, rule the world without question or objection, and be able to do anything you want and you will not be injured.

They are temptations to defy the natural order, and Jesus rejects all of them. Jesus does not so much “give up something” as he refuses to accept super-human powers.

M Scott Peck, well-known physician and popular writer (his book ***The Road Less Traveled*** spent close to 2 decades on the New York Times bestselling list), has written about emotional pain in his book ***Denial of the Soul***. Despite the title of the book, it has nothing to do with Lent, or with temptation as Jesus faced it, but Peck does speak about how many of us experience dysphoria.

Dysphoria is the opposite of euphoria – **eu** in Greek is “well” and so put in front of any word it speaks to something wonderful or beautiful. “Eulogy” is saying a good word, or wonderful remembrances, about someone at the time of death, while “euphonium” is a nice sounding musical instrument. “**Dys**” is what speaks of the negative, that which is not working (“dysfunctional”) or messed up (“disarray”). So “dysphoria” is seeing things as not working in our lives now, a sense of sadness and loss.

Peck writes: “Whenever we experience any painful emotion – grief, sadness, depression, or anger, for instance – we are dysphoric, but the cause is usually obviously at hand, the death of a loved one, betrayed by a business partner, the loss of a job.” Yet often dysphoria is used when there is no identifiable negative motivator to lead us into that sadness. (M. Scott Peck, *Denial of the Soul*, p. 63)

This book then enters into a somewhat complex discussion of mental health and finding balance in life, but it strikes me as an underpinning of what the temptation of Jesus is all about.

The temptation of Jesus is dismissed, and has no power over Jesus, because Jesus does not lead into the lure of the devil. Underneath the narrative of this temptation is a more basic truth – we often get ourselves into stress and upset when our expectations are beyond what is real and reasonable.

How often have you been stressed by that which can never happen, and so should be something you need to worry about? We can be upset about what our life provides to us whenever we dwell on our limitations instead of putting the focus on our opportunities.

Tissa Balasuriya, in an article within a book that discusses the theology of Kosuke Koyama, a well-known Asian theologian who wrote books about the ordinary nature of God’s presence in such creative tomes as “Three Mile-an-Hour God” and “Water Buffalo Theology,” states the following: “The God of Jesus’ revelation is the Creator, lover and provider of all humanity.” “All of us are from one common humanity” and the only one who controls life and death is God.

The temptation story is like a temptation to act like God on earth. And wherever we are on our understanding of Jesus being fully God and fully human, he clearly lives on earth as a human – he does not seek to live each day as if he has more power than anyone else. His feeding of the hungry, healing of the sick, and inspiring the downtrodden is special, and unique, he never acts as if he is God, but rather as one inspired and blessed by God.

He knows that the goal in life is to act and live within the parameters of nature and the rules of creation.

We can be frustrated by seeking the world to be different than it is because we have our own aspirations, needs, and desires, but putting ourselves ahead of what is fair and appropriate (even reasonable) is never right.

Looking to opportunities, and not dwelling on our own “dysphoria,” allows us to share a sense of the wholeness and hope that comes from God. It may not have anything to do with what we shall “give up,” but it does have something to do with our understanding of the meaning of Lent.