

St. Andrew's Anglican Church – Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commings+ - Rector

Scripture: Mark 1:9-13

"Forty is A Special Number"

We read today in the Holy Gospel that Jesus was in the desert for forty days and forty nights being tempted by Satan. I want to share with you some of the importance of the number 40 throughout Scripture.

- Noah and his family spent 40 days in the Ark – while the rest of mankind paid the price for their disobedience – as it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. (Genesis 7:12)
- Moses spent 40 days of preparation in the wilderness: Exodus 34:28 tells us that *"he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread or drink water."* (this can also be found in, Deuteronomy 9:18,25)
- The Israelites were supposed to travel 40 days on their trek through the wilderness, but because of their disobedience they wandered for 40 years: Deuteronomy 8:2-3 *"You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. "He humbled you and let you be hungry and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD."*
- Elijah spent 40 days and nights in seclusion as he ran from Jezebel in 1 Kings 19:8 *"So he arose and ate and drank and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God."*
- Israelite spies took forty days to spy out Canaan (Numbers 13:25)
- Israel served the Philistines for forty years (Judges 13:1)
- Goliath taunted Saul's army for forty days before David came to kill him. (1 Samuel 17:16)
- The number of lashes as punishment must not exceed forty. Jesus received 39 lashes when he was scourged at the pillar, (Deuteronomy 25:3)
- And – it was forty days between Jesus' Resurrection and His Ascension – preparing the Apostles, His disciples, and the world for the birth of the church – through the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

The number forty is a sign of preparation, of obedience, and of testing. Jesus, the Son of God, experienced testing in the wilderness after fasting for forty days and nights. He must have been hungry when Satan came to Him because the first thing that Satan offers Him is to have Jesus turn the stones into bread. The truth is that Jesus exhibited the faithful obedience of the Son to the Father where Israel failed miserably. The things offered to Jesus – bread, safety, and the kingdoms of this world—are rightfully His in the first place - being the Son of God, the Messiah. Jesus is called to be obedient to the Father, not only as the Son but also as a Servant. Jesus is to be a model of obedience to the will of the Father with the immense pressure of severe testing and at the cost of self-denial – the emptying of Himself – *"taking the form of a bond-servant and being made in the likeness of men."* (Philippians 2:7) He would express His

Messianic identity to the world, only in agreement with the will of the Father. Jesus never went around trying to prove who He was – it was only as God the Father would call Him to do.

Jesus' exhibits obedience to God the Father through humility, service, and suffering. That is true greatness! Jesus submits to the Father's will and demonstrates the relevance of the first great commandment from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the Shema: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*" Jesus throughout His life exhibits His submission to it. He is a living example of how Christians can live as sons and daughters of God, in full obedience to the will of God, including life's difficulties and tests. Those tests will not be the same as those faced by Jesus, which have to do with His being the Son of God and His obedience – even to death on the cross.

In the first temptation of Jesus by Satan, in the Gospel of Matthew 4:3-4, tell us, "*The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*"

A second temptation came in Matthew 4:6 saying to Jesus, "*If you are the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'*" He uses God's own Word from Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus – that He would not be injured – and tempted Him to prove Himself.

And then a third time Satan was offering to Jesus something that he did not even own – and in Matthew 4:8-9 "*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'*"

Each time Jesus is tempted He answers with the Holy Word of God – the Sword of the Spirit, trusting completely in the Father and to serving Him only. Jesus' first response was from Deuteronomy 8:3 as He said, "*It is written: Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*" The second temptation Jesus responds again from Deuteronomy 6:16 "*It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'*" And then when Jesus was offered the kingdoms of the world, He had had enough from the tempter – and He called him by name saying, "*Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'*" (Matthew 4:10) Jesus had just come through the waters of baptism – like the Israelites had come out of the waters of the Red Sea, but through the River Jordan. He had faced the equivalent of their 40 years in His 40 days and nights, meeting the enemy head on – "face to face!"

Did you ever notice that opportunity knocks only once, but temptation bangs on the door repeatedly – over and over again?

We are faced with tests and with temptations every day – but always remember:

- They aren't there to weaken us, they're there to make us stronger.
- They aren't there to make us bad, they're there to make us better.
- They aren't there as a penalty, they're there as a privilege to show our faith in Almighty God.
- They're there to strengthen us for God's purpose – and not for ours.

The author of the Epistle of James has quite a bit to say about being put to the test: *“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”* (James 1:2-4) Each one of us have been put through trials and put through tests. I mean – what is COVID-19 if it is not a trial? Everyone is wearing masks, taking precautions. Everybody is doing something that we are not used to doing – taking care of one another. Such a blessing that is! James later writes in that same chapter: *“Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.”* (James 1:12-13) So if you think for one second that God is putting you through a trial – no He is not. He is allowing that trial that Satan is putting you through – but He is also standing there with you, upholding you and helping you through. God is not setting a trap for you, waiting for you to slip up – what is that game where are gopher pops up and you bop him on the head? That is not what God is doing. He is not standing by, waiting to bop you on the head - instead, He is ready to catch you when you fall, and to hold on to you, to embrace you, to save you! That is how much God loves you!

In closing, I want to remind you of the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: *“Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”* (Ephesians 6:13-17)

My friends, during these 40 days of Lent and even beyond, keep your eyes on God, put your whole trust in Him and when the enemy whispers in your ear – simply tell Him “No – get away from me Satan - in the Name of Jesus!”