

First Sunday of Lent – March 1, 2020, Year A

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

“Put to the Test”

This past Thursday, I had the privilege of speaking at the Douglas Rotary Club. They wanted to know more about my career in radio – and by the way - this year is my 49th year in broadcasting – having started all the way back in the “dark ages” of 1971. One of those present was Roy Lindsey, the retired veterinarian, and also the father of my dentist, and he asked me the question – how long were you with AT&T – and I answered 26 years. He then asked and how long have you been a priest? I answered that I will have been a priest 15 years in December. Then he said – and 49 years in radio – that would make you 112! Everybody roared – it was really funny. Afterwards I asked him if he could follow me wherever I go – since he is a great straight man.

It was a wonderful opportunity to share with them about radio – but also how God can change a person's life and a focus of a lot of stuff of this world to looking for heavenly things. As I visually showed them, we played records, remember records? They might sometimes skip. Long story here – there was a diner across the street from the radio station where I did the midnight to 6 AM show when I first started out. So I went to go get something to eat about 3 o'clock in the morning. I put on a long song, and there was one long song by the Allman Brothers called Whipping Post. It was the whole second side of the LP – the album. I put it on and went out the door. When I got back to the radio station the song was skipping, and had been almost since the beginning of the song – about 20 minutes ago. I got back in the studio and gave it a little push and went on with the show, as if nothing had happened. The phones were lit up like crazy. Thank goodness radio no longer uses records! We also used tapes, and then CD's and now it is all digital.

Also way back then, you were required to perform regularly scheduled tests of the “Emergency Broadcast System” at different times of the day or night. How many of you remember hearing these words? *“This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. The broadcasters of your area in voluntary cooperation with the FCC and other authorities have developed this system to keep you informed in the event of an emergency. This is only a test!”* Then an ear-piercing dual tone would be heard (for what seemed like forever) followed by: *“If this had been an actual emergency, you would have been instructed to tune to one of the broadcast stations in your area for news and other important information. This concludes this test of the Emergency Broadcast System.”* Regular programming could then resume and there was a sigh of relief. In case of a real disaster – we were tested - regularly. You are probably asking – what does this have to do with the Gospel and with our readings today?

The people of God - the Israelites, who were coming out of slavery in Egypt, experienced testing on a regular basis in the wilderness for forty years. In today's Holy Gospel we read of Jesus, the Son of God, experiencing testing in the wilderness for forty days and nights. Jesus shows the faithful obedience of the Son to the Father where Israel failed miserably. The things that were offered to Jesus – bread, safety, and the kingdoms of this world—are rightfully His by virtue of His Sonship and Messianic identity. Jesus is called to be obedient to the Father,

not only as Son but also as a Servant. Jesus is to be a model of obedience to the will of the Father with the enormous pressure of severe testing and at the cost of self-denial – the emptying of Himself – as the Apostle Paul wrote, *“taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.”* (Philippians 2:7) He would show His Messianic identity to the world, only in agreement with the will of the Father.

Jesus’ obedience to God the Father is shown through humility, service, and suffering. In fulfilling His obedience to the will of the Father, Jesus demonstrates the significance of the first great commandment from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. It is called the Shema: *“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might”* Jesus in His life and His works is a living example of how Christians can live as sons and daughters of God, we are family, in full obedience to the will of God, including life’s difficulties and tests. Our tests will not be the same as those faced by Jesus, which have to do with His identity as the Son of God and His mission of obedience – even to death – death on the cross. Our tests will be similar in that as Christians we are called to self-sacrifice, and obedience to God’s will. We are called to believe and accept the freedom which Christ obtained for us on the cross – and learn to not only forgive others who wrong us – but more importantly to finally forgive ourselves – one of the most difficult things for people – forgiving themselves. We love to beat ourselves up. We have a most wonderful model to follow, for as Hebrews 4:15 tells us: *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin.”*

Here we are on the First Sunday of Lent, and we should be working these forty days to clean our own house. Lent is forty days long and is a time that requires preparation and obedience to God’s will! There is a real pattern with the number 40. Let me explain:

- Noah and his family spent 40 days in the Ark – while the rest of mankind paid the price for their disobedience. Eight people were on the Ark – everyone else died.
- Moses spent 40 days of preparation in the wilderness: Exodus 34:28 tells us that *“Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant--the Ten Commandments.”*
- Elijah spent 40 days and nights in solitude also: as we can read in 1 Kings 19:8 *“So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.”*
- The Israelites were to spend 40 days – but because of their disobedience they wandered for 40 years: Deuteronomy 8:2-3 *“Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”*

First Sunday of Lent – March 1, 2020, Year A

But wait – there is more to come. I want to suggest to you this morning, a remarkable relationship between the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden and the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness of the Negev. Listen to these words from our first reading this morning, Genesis 3:1 *“Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”* The serpent questioned the woman about God’s command and the fruit of the tree. In Matthew 4:3 he shows his ugly head again! *“And the tempter came and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.’”* I need to remind you about what happened when Jesus came up out of the Jordan at His baptism. Matthew 3:17 *“And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’”* Satan uses that moment as a springboard – asking Jesus, *“If You are the Son of God...”* do something spectacular – and he also plays on Jesus’ hunger, having fasted for 40 days and nights, and tells Jesus to turn the stones into bread!

A second temptation to Eve came in Genesis 3:4 *“The serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die!’”* The enemy was standing against God’s own words – and quite frankly, he was calling God a liar – that she would not suffer death from doing her own will. The tempter uses a similar tact with Jesus in the Negev; in Matthew 4:6 by 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.’”* The very nerve of him, using God’s own Word from Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus – that He would not be injured – so why not “just do it!

And then a third time Satan had something to say: in Genesis 3:5 he told Eve, *“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* He was offering something that he did not 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 Satan with the Word of God – the Sword of the Spirit, trusting completely in the Father and serving Him only. His first response was from Deuteronomy 8:3 which we heard a little earlier: *“man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”* The second temptation Jesus responds again from Deuteronomy 6:16 *“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, *“Go Satan!”* Jesus then referred back to Deuteronomy 6:13 and 10:20 when He said, *“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. He now was facing the equivalent of their 40 years in His 40 days and nights, meeting the enemy head on – “face to face!” As a sign of victory over Satan, Jesus would spend 40 days walking amongst His people after His Resurrection on Easter Sunday, until He ascended to the Father. You have heard just a few of the “40’s” that I took from Scripture to share with you today. It is a significant number with God, just as seven is a significant number, as is three.

When we are tested I want to offer you this encouragement from the Apostle James, *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”* (James 1:2-4) He later writes in that very same chapter: *“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.”* (James 1:12-13)

It is so very important for each one of us to understand that God is not setting a trap for you. God is not sitting and waiting for you to mess up, to fall, to slip up – instead, He is ready to catch you when you fall, He is ready to pick you back up and to hold on to you, to embrace you, to save you! I want to encourage you that during these 40 days of Lent and beyond, keep your eyes on God, putting your whole trust in Him. He will not let you down.