

First Sunday in Lent, Year C – March 9, 2025
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ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
VERGENNES, VERMONT
Deuteronomy 26:1-11 | Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 | Romans 10:8b-13 | Luke 4:1-13

On Ash Wednesday, I said that there are several times in the church year when we are called to grow closer to God. In Advent, we prepare for Jesus' coming into the world. And in Lent, we prepare for Jesus' death and resurrection. The Church teaches us to observe Lent in three ways: by fasting, praying, and giving. A priest and mentor at my sending parish, St. Mary's Bonita Springs, Fr. George, offered a fourth way to observe Lent. He challenged us to look for holy opportunities to serve.

In 2014, my daughter was in public high school when a friend asked me to attend a school board meeting. At that meeting, two school board members were trying to redirect public school funds to the charter school that they co-founded and that their children attended. They accused their fellow board members of a variety of sins—administrative waste, moral corruption, evidenced by some of the unacceptable library books they found. Supporters of these two board members took their case to the press and school staff began to remove books and videos from media center bookshelves. Teachers and principals grew anxious that their classroom libraries or schools would be targeted for public humiliation, so they censored themselves. A chilly climate took hold in Florida's public schools, and the chill had begun to seep into public universities and colleges by the time I entered the discernment process in 2017. But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

After that school board meeting, I decided to accept this holy opportunity to organize a grassroots campaign to elect two new candidates to the school board. These new parent-

candidates would focus on the needs of all schools and stop trying to control what all kids learned. This was a nonpartisan campaign. Our main goal was to encourage parents, grandparents and retired teachers to spread the good news about public schools and get out the vote. We also wanted the community to be aware that that public schools were being attacked to justify letting parents use public school funds for charter and private school education. This is school choice. The governor of Vermont is promoting school choice now. I'm happy to talk more about the last few decades of school choice in Florida at coffee hour. The bottom line is that school choice reinforces segregation in American schools.

What does this have to do with today's Gospel reading? At the same time that I was getting involved in local politics, my church offered the discernment process. In the old days, people would go off to seminary, get their degrees, become ordained, and then be called to lead a church. Now, discernment committees composed of clergy and parishioners interview candidates six times over six months. The committee helps parishioners discern their calls. I had always felt called to work in the church, but I decided to enter into discernment at this moment because I wanted to stay anchored to my faith. I wanted to resist the temptation to be critical, overly proud, deceitful...all the bad choices we make when we try to persuade people to do *what we believe* is the right thing. I didn't want to lose myself. The monthly discernment meetings "returned my soul to myself." And the decision to do the two things together made a difference. The discernment committee approved me as a postulant for holy orders. After the bishop approved, I could apply to seminaries. Our two candidates were elected to the school board, and they are still serving the district well today. Through all this, I was able to stay on high ground.

Those were wilderness days. Filled with the Holy Spirit, I entered into the world, where for several months, I was tempted by the devil, not the red-skinned guy with horns and a tail, more like Satan, the adversary. That's not to say that our opponents were evil. They were trying to reshape the world in their own image. They were serving themselves. My real adversary was that thing—whether the world, or an evil spirit, or my own self—who tested and tempted me in a variety of ways. Let's revisit today's Gospel again, then end with how it helps to guide us through the wilderness.

In today's Gospel, Jesus was tempted by the devil to feed himself. Jesus didn't use his own words to answer the devil. Instead, he quoted scripture: "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." The devil then led him up and showed him in one instant all the kingdoms of the world. The devil told Jesus that if he worshiped the devil, he could be the glory of all the kingdoms and have full authority over them. Jesus answered again from scripture: "It is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Scripture anchored Jesus to God and enabled him to remain himself, unchanged, untempted by comfort or power. The devil was persistent, using scripture as a weapon to manipulate Jesus, saying, "throw yourself down from the top of the temple, for it is written, God will command the angels to protect you and on their hands, they will bear you up so you will not dash your foot against a stone." The temple was where the priests worked, but Jesus knew that religious leaders worked closely with Israel's Roman occupiers. Jesus did not need to impress them with his power. He shut down the challenge with a higher truth: "It is said, do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Deut 6:16).

What lessons can we learn from watching Jesus navigate the devil's temptations?

First, Jesus entered the wilderness, knowing that he was God's beloved son and that God was pleased with him. **Know that you, too, are beloved by God.**

Second, after Jesus was baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit, he could endure forty days in the wilderness. **Fill your spirit before you enter into the wilderness.**

Third, the devil tried to make Jesus the center of attention, appealing to his human nature, trying to convince him to use his own power to fulfill his own desires. Jesus used God's word to help him navigate through the devil's temptations. **Remember that you are not alone.**

Lastly, Jesus found in scripture the words to give voice to his trust. He said only what he knew to be true. He quoted from the book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Scriptures. **Scripture and prayer help keep us centered on God's love, compassion and mercy.**

The Gospel passage that helped me decide whether to support or oppose a candidate or policy was Matthew 25:31. How might proposed changes affect people who have no voice or power—foreigners, the sick, and the poor. The state legislature controls education in Florida. Instead of restoring funding to public schools with over 90% English language learners and students from lower income families, state funds were redirected to private and charter schools. Many students were left behind. The same policies are being considered at the national level now. On every issue, think about who will benefit from policies and who will be harmed. We are called to serve the poor, the sick, the foreigners, as though they are Jesus. The holy opportunities don't vanish at Easter. Listen for God's call.