

Denice K. Leslie
February 25, 2007
Luke 4: 1-13 Lent 1, Year C

“Famished!”

Begin with Kim's Story Sermon: *“When Opportunity Knocks”*:

Huffing and puffing a bit, I caught up with him where he was resting beside the trail.

He looked tired and hungry. I took him back to the desert hot springs.

Great place to eat. Four stars in the book. I ordered for both of us. (I let him drink some water and recover just a bit before I ventured anything.)

"I like what you stand for," I said. "I could get behind it."

"We've been waiting for a longtime for a man like you to come along. If you're really the one we've been waiting for, let's see what you can do to get your P.R. campaign off the ground."
"People are impressed by somebody who can deliver.

Got any idea to show you can position yourself to the best advantage?"

"I see you haven't touched your steak. Too rich for your blood?" (ah, I know...) You're feeling bad about that hungry kid we saw when we came in?

You know, we could work that angle. You've got a heart. Wouldn't be hard to score a point on how the politicians don't. How they're out of touch.

We can put up a billboard with some fat bureaucrat saying, 'Let them eat cake!'

"We could do a sound byte at the soup kitchen-you serving. Children, of course; no bums.

Better yet, we could get the fairgrounds and do your own big dinner for families. You've got the resources, don't you?

What could you handle? Four--five thousand? We could throw in a little class entertainment.

You win 'em over without working up a sweat.

Remember what that guy (wasn't he a Roman?) said, "An army marches on its stomach."

Just think what you could do with that kind of following."(Pause)

"Bread and circuses? I think not," he said. "As it's written, You can't live on bread alone."

"Ok, I see. You want to make a more lasting impact on the root causes of hunger, right?

Well, that can be arranged. I have friends in high places in every capital of the world, and they owe me one.

You could call the shots. You could run for office, write your own ticket.

Forget the bread for today. A little hunger can move people into the streets. I can mobilize them. YOU can wow them.

You've got a gifted tongue. You know what to say to get them out there.

Voice their frustrations. Sympathize with their anger. Appeal to their nationalism. I'll find the enemy, the scapegoat.

You'll have them eating out of your hand.

The powers that be won't stand a chance.

You can turn the world upside down. Think what that would mean. Think of the power for good, the positive influence you'd have.

With me as your campaign manager, you'd have it made.

You just sign the contract, and I'll take care of the details..... And you can do what you do best!" (Pause)

(I could tell he was really thinking this one over.....I waited)

"Well..... (.He said.) "It's a tempting proposition, isn't it? Thanks.....but no thanks. There's only one boss I'll take orders from.....and it isn't you."

"Okay, Okay, You're on the ball, aren't you? You've got the point. I haven't been paying attention to the religious angle, have I? That was stupid of me.

"Famished!" by Rev. Denice K Leslie

Well, then.....how about a little demonstration of your spiritual powers?"

"Show them what you can do. Put the best magicians to shame. Fulfill their highest expectations. No petty predicting the future. No reading minds.

I've got just the place. YOU know it. You know the tradition. You know the scripture.

"If you're really who I hope you are, you'll be the one to jump from the tower and live.

That will leave no doubt in your mind or in the people. And God won't dare let the investment in you come to nothing." (Pause)

(He didn't hesitate this time, he said:) "I see you're well acquainted with the scripture yourself.

So you should know the one that says: ' Don't test God.'" (Pause).

"I didn't have a good comeback right then. So I left him there, but I'll be back.....I'll be back when the opportunity comes. I'll be back. You can bet on it." (pause)

What's wrong with being famished and wanting a little bread..... if not for yourself, then for people who are hungry everyday? Nothing. What's wrong with wanting to influence the world for the better? Nothing.

What's wrong in wanting God to save you from disaster? Nothing.

Think about it: Jesus fed the hungry thousands. Jesus became the ruler of all nations. Jesus put himself in God's hands on the cross.

BUT.....not on the devils terms.....not on our terms.

What the devil offered was a short, quick fix--a happy ending without tragedy--a fantasy.

We seem to prefer quick fixes these days. (pause)

Did you read about the man who co-founded the environmental group Greenpeace?

Much to the chagrin of the environmental movement he helped create, he's now championing nuclear power because he sees the ultimate effects of global warming and he's looking for an immediate solution—albeit one with a potentially equally life threatening problem: nuclear waste. Iran is looking for the same fix. Like this man, Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread, to do good but at the expense of his mission in order to get immediate results.

Jesus was tempted to fulfill political expectations. To free his people from their oppression, using whatever means he could, legitimate or not. [and notice that there is no question that the kingdoms of the world are the devil's to give].

He was tempted to do what a few others probably did with fatal results:

Throw himself off the Temple, where the rabbis said the Messiah would first appear.

But Jesus understood that to put himself at risk, to test God's care in this manner would be to require God to serve him instead of him serving God such recklessness would be more self-serving than God--serving.

Traditionally, we have found comfort and hope in this passage that any temptations we've had, Jesus had and more... And so we to can overcome.....But there's something more in the story of Jesus' temptation.

Note that in Luke's version the tempter isn't called Satan with a capital "S," but devil with a small "d."

And what do we get if we take the "d" off of devil? Yes: Evil.

This story teaches us that even our best intentions can easily be co-opted by the power of evil.

Because there is no human antidote for evil. The seductions of temptation lie in *all* our minds. We need God whether our intentions are good or ill.

“Famished!” by Rev. Denice K Leslie

The season of Lent calls us to remember that. To remember that sin is real and afflicts every one of us. Rationalizations constantly whisper in our ears as we seek to justify almost everything we do.

True justification is to be justified before God—and the only way to do that is through faith alone. Faith is trust and reliance on God.

Lent is a five week, 40 day period that invites us to recognize our own wilderness wandering: to face our own struggles with the way life tests and tempts us.

It invites us to turn back to reliance on our Creator and not on self.

It was in learning to rely on God as the source of all true power that Jesus was able to accomplish all that he did. We know what it means to be famished just as he was when he met the devil. If not for food then for whatever it takes to make life meaningful and happy.

Our consumer culture contrives to fill that need for us with things, with money, with sex and power.

A recent survey of college students' goals found the vast majority have the same objective: to make as much money as they can....for themselves.

In contrast, the Fresno Bee reported this week that “ the number of poor people who are living in severe poverty has reached a 32 year high, (with) millions of working Americans falling closer to the poverty line as the gulf between the nation's haves and have nots continues to widen.”

The number of severely poor Americans grew by 26% between 2000 and 2006. At the same time the share of national income going to corporate profits has dwarfed the amount going to wages and salaries. Which helps explain why middle class incomes have fallen for five straight years.

Which means everyone beneath us is falling in income as well.

Obviously, when left to our own human waywardness, people go hungry. People fall into homelessness and want.

Some have more than others and care not.

Some have more than others and care a great deal.

And so we humans wander in the wilderness of our own making. ALL in want.

Jesus went into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and nights as he sought God's will. In that time he was tempted with the very things all of us who abide in mortal flesh are tempted with: the lust for wealth, political power, influence and having God save us from the vicissitudes of life including our own stupidity—such as jumping off tall towers.

Granted, Jesus wanted to do things like end hunger. But even those among us who hunger for these same goods are often tempted to find the quick fix.

But we, as Christians, need to look to Jesus to see how he addressed the world.

His response was to rely on God for power and security and for ways to be truly engaged in what is saving and what is just for everyone. We are famished for the same things Jesus was famished for: wholeness and well being for the whole of creation.

And yes, we too often find ourselves wishing all the stones we touch on a beach would turn to 100 dollar bills—but we largely want to do the right thing. We just don't know how.

We look to the world instead of look to God for how.

I invite you today to practice an ancient Lenten discipline whose purpose is to help us look to God and toward our neighbor.

For the next five weeks of lent, I invite you to follow Jesus example and to fast—not for forty days---just from one meal a week or if you are physically able, from eating for an entire day.

I remember fasting for a week when I was in seminary—I was on a health kick—it wasn't

“Famished!” by Rev. Denice K Leslie

about improving my spiritual life. But much to my surprise it did just that.

I found after the craving for food left on the third day that there was a tremendous freedom from having to worry about food.

I was able to focus on my studies and my church work with renewed vigor—I was an intern in Christian Education at Napa First UMC.

After the third day, I didn’t miss the food at all. And I felt better—clearer minded.

That is the purpose of fasting: first to remind us from whom all truly satisfying things come—being famished and wishing for food—becoming fixated on it makes one appreciate it as a good gift of God.

And later, being freed from that craving makes one realize how the mere pursuit of satisfying ourselves everyday also detracts us from focusing our attention on God.

Suddenly God becomes a bigger part of the picture.

Along with others. Because we begin to realize in our fasting how others go hungry around the world every day. We know how it feels to be truly hungry.

Our youth group is completing their annual 30 hour famine this a.m. They have spent the weekend learning about world hunger and doing service projects for others.

I invite us to follow their example by taking up this ancient spiritual practice of fasting and to put the money the single meal or the three meals would have cost you each week, into an envelope and bring that offering with you on Palm Sunday marked, “Homeless ministry.”

Our Homeless Ministry Team met for the first time this week and we are going to need some start up funds to get our projects for the hard-core homeless in our community going.

You will be hearing lots more about these projects in the very near future. They have

plans the whole congregation and everyone you know can easily participate in.

How many of you think you can do this? Raise your hands?

(If a few: Oh, this is pretty new to us, isn’t it? Well-try the one meal a week—that shouldn’t be too hard—as I said, as long as you have no physical or medical constraints such as needing to take medication with every meal)

(If many: How encouraging—I know some can’t do it due to medical constraints such as having to take medication with every meal.) Each week we will add another of Christian practice to our Lenten journey. Right now let us bow our heads as I offer a prayer of confession.

Let us pray:

Have mercy on us and hear our prayer, O God: We have failed to trust your promise. We have failed to seek your Spirit’s guidance as we face the tempter. We stumble hungry and thirsty in a wilderness of our own making. We have failed to be faithful to the Gospel. We proclaim a gospel that asks no repentance. We live according to our own desires, not as citizens subject to your reign over all creation. Give us hope that we might trust your promise.

Give us strength that we might pass the test. Give us courage to repent and believe and bear witness to the Gospel in all its fullness. Amen