

God empowers us for Obedience

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey
at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, February 14, 2016
The First Sunday of Lent (year C), Luke 4:1-13.

Luke 4:1-13 (NRSV) Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

In this season of Lent, we walk the wilderness journey with Jesus. In today's Gospel reading, immediately following Jesus' Baptism, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus out into the wilderness, where he faced hunger and temptation. We hear of three times that the devil tempted Jesus, all at the end of the forty days, when, as the Bible understates it, Jesus was famished. This is a fitting reading for us as we begin our 40 day Lenten journey of fasting, prayer, and self-denial.

Because Lent is a time for self-examination and repentance, we often focus on the temptations of Jesus in this passage. It is true that learning more about the subtleties of sin and temptation can help us in our struggle against it. And Lent is an appropriate time for that study. But what if we turned our emphasis from sin and temptation and toward one of its positive alternatives? What if we looked at obedience?

Focusing on obedience is focusing on where God wants us to go. There is an old story about an agent of the secret service who investigated makers of counterfeit money. When asked about all the counterfeit that the agent must study, the agent replied "actually, I study only real money, and I study it constantly and closely. Then the counterfeit is easy to catch."

Often temptation can come in very appealing clothes, so temptation may not be as easy to see if you are not focused on obedience. People dress up their sins, often knowing full well that these seemingly small things will get them off track and into trouble. People say things such as "oh, I'm not cheating on my wife, I'm just flirting with my secretary," or "I'm not really cheating on this test, I'm just getting inspiration from my classmate's paper," or "I'm not cheating on my taxes, I'm just a little creative in my reporting."

A commitment to obedience wouldn't need to parse the subtle differences. If I am committed to my wife, I'll want to honor her face to face and with my secretary (and in my own mind). If I am committed to learning in school, then I'll show what I know and do my best to express it, so that I can learn. If I am obedient in honesty, then I'll report what I earn as clearly as possible, even if it costs me more taxes.

Think about Jesus' temptations. Two of them, at least, seem fairly innocuous. If he is the Son of God, what's wrong about making bread to feed his hunger? The devil even quotes the Bible about God's pledge to keep him safe. These are temptations to good things, aren't they? Yet these good things would take Jesus off track—and away from his obedience to God the Father. The Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness, and hunger and thirst were part of his calling as difficult as hunger and thirst may be. Trust in God without proof was part of his calling. Obedience without glory was essential to his calling. So doing a good thing that is nonetheless contrary to his calling would be disobedient to the Father, and would undo what Jesus came to accomplish.

Obedience is a fairly unpopular concept these days. Americans like our independence. 'Don't tread on me—I'll do it my way, and no one should tell me what I should do.' We rightly resist tyrants and oppression, and we are blessed with greater freedom than many in the world. But we've lost the value of obedience, even obedience to God.

I suppose we don't like obedience because it might not be fun, in fact it might make us uncomfortable. Obedience doesn't always feel fair—why do I have to be the obedient one, while everyone else does whatever they want? Even if we're willing to consider obedience, we want to understand what we're doing and why. We want to be assured that there is a good reason and a good outcome from our obedience. Otherwise, we don't feel that it is worth it. We wouldn't want to give unless there was some payoff or return that we can see coming. Obedience turns upside down a world where self-interest is king. Ultimately, we don't like obedience because it means that we're not in control. Obedience means someone else is in charge—and not me!

In a world where people have broken our trust, obedience asks us to trust God. In an outcome driven world, obedience asks us to leave the outcomes to God. In a world where we like to set the terms in which we will act, obedience asks us to give of ourselves on God's terms, not on our terms. Obedience requires submission and humility and trust and a willingness to act without always understanding.

Well, that sounds pretty unappealing, doesn't it? So what is the benefit of obedience? Why is obedience good? First of all, I'm certainly talking about obedience to God. Though God wants us to practice obedience to each other, especially those who have legitimate authority in our lives, we must always obey God first, and recognize the fallibility of those in human authority. Likewise, those in authority bear a greater burden for their own obedience to God.

If God is truly the God of the universe (and God is); if God is truly good (and God truly is good); if God truly loves us (and he does), then our obedience to God will be good—good for us and good for others. God's commands to us are for the benefit of each of us and the benefit of all of us together. Perhaps God's purpose in my obedience is not all about me and my self-interest. Perhaps our obedience will accomplish something that meets the needs of others, even as it may ask something from us. Perhaps our obedience may involve giving of ourselves or some form of loss for us, but in God's eternal vision, our obedience will bring us closer to God and his hopes for our neighbors as well.

Often, obedience to God is important simply because it is right and good, and the world around us is often the enemy of the right and good. Doing the right thing, therefore, may involve sacrifice and loss, nonetheless, it is still the right thing. Turning from what is right in those circumstances tends to reinforce the sin around us, and make it harder for others who are quietly trying to do the right thing. Staying silent while a friend is bullied or joining in gossip and negativity might help you to get along, but it furthers the pain for others.

When we are obedient to God, however, we join with God in God's plan of salvation. We walk closer with God and cooperate with God's work in the world. We walk along with Jesus and in his footsteps of self-sacrifice. In that way, obedience to God is part of sanctification—of God forming us more closely into his image—conforming more closely to the God who gave himself for us.

Though Lent is a time for self-examination, our self is not the focus of our attention. We practice self-examination in order to walk more closely with God. Obedience is not about self-improvement, it is about cooperating with what God is doing in us and through us. So how do we overcome our resistance and lead more obedient lives? Certainly, we can learn more about the Christian life. We can read and study scripture and pray and learn from others who walk this journey with us.

Most importantly, however, God the Holy Spirit empowers us for obedience. Look again at today's Gospel reading. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at his Baptism—he was full of the Holy Spirit. Then the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness. And the Holy Spirit, alive in the text of scripture, gave him confidence in the face of temptation. When we worship and pray and study the Bible, we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit who works in us this process of sanctification. God the Holy Spirit helps us up when we stumble, helps us learn when we fail, and gets us back on our feet, still beloved by God, still called forward to a closer walk with him.

This reading about Jesus' obedience is a helpful model for our own obedience. But this reading is really not about us. This reading is about Jesus and his obedience. Jesus gave up his glory, gave up his power, gave up even his security and safety to give himself for us. Jesus' obedience on the cross was painful to endure, but by it he gained our freedom from sin. And by his resurrection, he gained eternal life for us, his often disobedient yet beloved children.

In this season of Lent, embrace the task of obedience as a journey walking closely with God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, assured of his love for us, and participating in God's blessings for the world.