

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.
Please be seated.

This past week, we marked the start of the season of Lent with our Ash Wednesday service. We have now entered into the 40 days of Lent – the number of days between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. This is always a little confusing because Sundays don't count, and so it is actually 46 days. But there are always 2 sure and dependable signs in Canada that Lent is upon us: Cadbury Easter Crème Eggs are back on the grocery store shelves, and Tim Horton's encourages us once again to, "Roll up the Rim to Win". These 2 annual events in the Canadian calendar are actually intimately connected to Lent. Cadbury and Tim Horton's marketing executives are well acquainted with the Christian tradition of giving up something for Lent, and so they organize their campaigns each year to precede Ash Wednesday – not because they are necessarily in support of the spirit of Lent, but because they fear people abstaining from chocolate and caffeine and they fear what that might mean for the bottom line. And so, Cadbury and Tim Horton's enter into the season of temptation and bring us all along for the ride.

It is not surprising that our Gospel passage for this first Sunday of Lent is focused on the presence of temptation, but also the strength to resist that temptation.

Lent has, for many centuries, been perceived as a time to abstain from something – coffee, chocolate, smoking, consuming alcohol – in order that we "test" ourselves in some way by giving up something. The problem, traditionally, is that we tend to almost overcompensate for that abstinence by overindulging in whatever we gave up as soon as Easter morning arrives. We have to question the logic in that, particularly in the face of our Gospel passage from Luke. Jesus was out in the wilderness for the purpose of working out his calling from God; trying to determine God's will for his life. It is true that he fasted by abstaining from food. Ancient people saw fasting as a means to clear their heads, to allow them to focus

on important spiritual matters. This is significant, because the struggle to eat was very real for them. As has been true for most agriculturally based cultures throughout history, people thought about food all of the time because they were also engaged in the business of producing crops and other food sources. And because they did not have supermarkets or even a corner grocery store, a lot of the day was often devoted to locating and preparing food. Jewish traditions and rituals around food preparation were also often time consuming. Without the benefit of refrigeration, they also didn't have the kinds of conveniences that we enjoy today around the storage of food. And so, to abstain from eating also meant that a person had more time to engage in thinking and reflecting on spiritual matters. When you compare that to our 21st century tendencies to abstain from something during Lent, our attempts can seem a little trivial – not because we aren't challenged, but because we can often forget the spiritual reason that is supposed to underlie giving something up. The purpose of letting go of something during Lent is to create time and space for us to more deeply consider the spiritual side of our lives; not to help us to lose weight or be a little healthier. And while there are benefits to those things, Lent is intended to be more about shedding spiritual weight – those things that bog us down and prevent us from living fully Christian lives – and to become spiritually more healthy. This is something that I am not sure that the good people of the Cadbury and Tim Horton's corporations understand.

Returning to the Gospel of Luke, we hear how Jesus was, “led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil.” The important phrase here is, “led by the Spirit.” There is an ethic of intentionality here that we need to understand or the story loses its impact. Jesus didn't just wake up one morning and head out the back door for a long walk – he felt compelled to undertake this journey because the Holy Spirit prompted him to do so. And we need to also understand that Jesus was placing a lot of trust in the Holy Spirit

because there was a lot of danger associated with being out in the wilderness for an extended period of time. Food and water would have been limited – which certainly created the conditions for fasting. But the heat, the exposure to the sun, wild animals – these would only be some of the dangers that he would have faced. There would also have been the danger of self-doubt. We are told that Jesus was out in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. In biblical terms, we don't know if it was literally 40 days and nights because the number "40" is often used in Scripture simply to mean "a long time". But we do know that it was a long time. We also know that it matches the number 40 used to describe Israel's travels across the wilderness after they escaped from Egypt under Moses' leadership. The Old Testament books of Exodus and Kings tell us that that journey took 40 years – a long time by human standards; particularly when we think of the lifespan of a human being at that time and we consider the environmental conditions.

In May of 2009, I was working in Dubai and found myself frustrated by always being indoors and never getting any fresh air. And so I decided one day to go for a walk. As I exited the front door of the hotel, an employee followed me as I walked towards the edge of the hotel property. He wanted to know if he could help me. "No, thanks," I said. "I'm just going for a walk." "No, ma'am, you can't," he said. "Yes, I can. I want fresh air," I said. The poor employee then stood on the 10 feet of grass that separated the hotel from the desert and watched me trudge about 10 yards across the sand and then turn around and come back. "I'm good now," I said. The employee was both relieved and gracious and simply said, "I'm glad" as we headed back into the hotel. In the 42 degree heat, the 2 or 3 minutes that I spent out on the desert seemed like a long time. Doing that for 40 days with limited food and water supplies would have been unimaginable for me – even with my sunglasses and SPF 60. And so we need to think about the magnitude of this

journey that Jesus is taking. Physically and spiritually, this was an incredible undertaking and his faith in God and in the Holy Spirit would have been enormous.

It is interesting to note that the devil comes into the story only after the 40 days and we know that Jesus is “famished”. He comes when Jesus would be at a low ebb in terms of his physical condition as a human being. Jesus knows at this point that he is the Son of God and that there is a particular call from God for his life that he needs to understand. But he hasn’t yet discerned that call; in fact, he is out in the wilderness to work out exactly what that call is. It is interesting to note that the devil recognizes Christ’s true identity and twice refers to him as “the Son of God.” At that time, that title was reserved for the emperor Augustus who believed that he ruled by divine right. This is an important detail, because the devil tempts Jesus in three ways: by attempting to bribe him, by trying to draw him into the trap of the illusion of human power, and by endeavouring to get him to think about image in human terms. These are all human failings of those who were in power in that part of the world at that time of Roman occupation. Certainly the emperor Augustus would have been flagrantly guilty of all three of these weaknesses. But, very interestingly, the picture that the devil paints serves only to bring Christ’s calling from God into sharper focus. In the end, Jesus chooses a life that is exactly the opposite of the images that he saw when the devil spoke to him. In the art world, this is sometimes referred to as “figure and ground”; using the contrast of colour or shading to more clearly separate two things. In literature, we sometimes refer to this as a “foil”; using the imagery of words to show the contrast and more clearly separate two things. In this story from Luke, we very clearly see the contrast and separation between being “in the world” and being “of the world”. Jesus chooses the former and rejects the latter, and we are reminded this morning that we are called to do the same. In the verses of Luke that follow, Jesus returns to the northwest coast of the sea of Galilee in Capernaum and begins to form a

community. He has discerned his call from God to enter into what will become three years of ministry. He builds relationships with others and begins the work of sharing his talents and his God-given powers in order to build up the Kingdom of God on Earth. He now understands that this is why he came into the world and he accepts this call from God – right up until the very end which will be the crucifixion.

And so, as we begin our Lenten journey for this year, we have an opportunity once again to take what this morning's Gospel passage to heart. In our own ways and to varying degrees, we are all out in the wilderness. It may be a psychological wilderness of self-doubt, it may be the wilderness of health concerns, it may be the wilderness of loneliness or loss, it may be the wilderness of regret, or a wilderness of financial troubles – there are many forms that the wilderness can take beyond the literal. But if we can take the time to ask if we have been led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit for a particular purpose, then we can find some meaning out of the experience and perhaps find clues as to what God is calling us into. Perhaps we might be confronting a personal weakness or perhaps we might be called to rectify a wrong from the past. Perhaps God is calling us into something different, a new purpose for our lives. When I was ordained, I had the very naïve notion that I had found what I had been called into and that I wasn't going to have to go through any more of that work of discerning. I was wrong.

Being called by God isn't a one-time event; it is a lifelong process of evolving and becoming. The final call that we will hear from God will be the call to come home, when our mortal life is done. When we consider all that happened to Jesus in the three years after he emerged from the wilderness to begin his ministry, we can clearly see that call is ongoing and we are never done as long as we are in our mortal state. The trick is to set aside time and energy to listen to God and to discern that call. Giving up chocolate or coffee alone will not allow you to do that.

It might help – but stepping aside from the noise and demands of the world during this season of Lent will likely be more productive. Taking time to pray and to reflect will more likely lead you where you need to be in your life.

Lent is also an opportunity for us to set aside that voice of self-doubt as we grapple with our own wilderness and come to a decision about action. We need to include God in that plan, to give us wisdom, guidance, and strength to move forward, to make sure that our plan of action is not based on ourselves alone. Otherwise, we will find ourselves returning to that same wilderness over and over again. In the weeks ahead, I encourage all of us – and I include myself in that encouragement – to first try to identify what exactly is our own personal wilderness at this time. Secondly, we need to invite God into that wilderness and allow Him to walk with us over the next 40 or so days so that when we emerge from Lent and enter into the joy of the Easter message, we will perhaps be just a tiny bit clearer about what it is that God is calling us to – individually and as a Christian community – in the coming year. Amen.