

Deuteronomy 26:1–11

Romans 10:8b–13

Luke 4:1–13

Overview:

Lent is a time of reflection of our sinful nature, a time of repentance, and an opportunity to remind ourselves that we are forgiven in the work of Jesus. Although God's plan was in place for all eternity, Lent focuses on the journey that Christ made from the Jordan River to the cross. These events serve as reminders that through Holy Baptism He has brought us out of bondage, and we are free from the sins and corruption of our nature. Lent is a time to prepare for this journey just as Christ prepared for His.

Lesson:

Use Lent to reflect on our sins and failures and remind ourselves that it is for this reason that Jesus hung on the cross. But also look forward to Easter when Christ exchanged our sin for his righteousness (The Great Exchange) and are comforted that we are indeed saved.

Message:

Who remembers this game? That's right. It is Candyland – the game whose goal was to complete a journey from the Gingerbread Plum Trees to the Candy Castle. I remember playing this game with my children: over and over again. As soon as one game would end, they would want to go back to the beginning and start over. This could have repeated this forever, but I usually limited the number of games to five.

At times it felt as if the clock froze while we played and, I will admit, that it was during these times I would stack the deck just to finish the game faster. I can't tell you how many times my child would draw the same dual-squared card on every single turn and be amazed at how much farther ahead they would be from me! We could complete each game in under five minutes and all of the games in under a half an hour.

It was comforting to know that if I had to go on this Candyland journey, I could turn my mind off, start and then end in no time at all. It took very little effort, made the children happy, and allowed me to quickly move to a new task.

Sometimes life can be no different for us than Candyland, especially when the journey is one that is repeated on a regular basis. Think about the last time you drove to work or to the grocery store. The destination was the goal and the journey added very little, if any value to it. You could have driven different paths, could have listened to music, or just zoned out and the destination would have felt no different. And that would have been OK because you would have been driving to work or the store. But for other events it is the journey itself that prepares us for the destination. Examples of this include college or preparing for a driver's license. In these times

the value of the destination is realized and appreciated only through the struggle of the journey. I can't imagine handing someone a license before they ever sat in a driver's seat!

Today we enter the church season of Lent, and even though it happens every year we must protect ourselves from turning on auto pilot and coasting into Easter. It is an event where we realize greater personal value through the struggle on our journey than if we just "end up" at Easter morning and so it is critical that we not only prepare for Lent but are fully active during this time.

But as important as the journey is, so too are the preparations beforehand and this morning that's where I'd like to spend my time. It seems fitting on this first Sunday of Lent that we discuss how we prepare for our journey to Easter Sunday and the Bible supports the importance of preparations because it records them throughout the Old and New Testament.

The first one that comes to mind is the Passover. In Exodus, 30 verses are consumed to record the very detailed preparations that the Israelites had to follow before they journeyed out of Egypt. The commands for that evening were very specific concerning what type of sheep or goat they were to slaughter and what they were to do with the blood. The food they ate, and didn't eat, and even how they were to be dressed during the meal were detailed to them. God determined it very important that they prepared for their journey in a very specific way.

Noah is another example where God impresses upon us the importance of preparations. Moses records the commands from God: "So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it:" etc... (Genesis 6:14-15a)

This leads us to today's Gospel reading. It is on page 859 in your chair Bible if you want to follow along. Bookending this passage on one side is the baptism of Jesus. The previous chapter in Luke ends in this way:

"²¹When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²²and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

In the middle sits today's Gospel: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil."

The other bookend follows immediately after the temptation; "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside." From there Luke records Christ's journey to the cross – and to Easter morning.

Don't miss this: Jesus prepared for his journey. After his mission had been blessed by God through his baptism, he immediately spent 40 days preparing for the road that he was about to travel down. If God needs to prepare, how much more do we?

Let's go back to our Gospel passage from this morning.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”

Forty days Jesus prepared by fasting and praying. And for forty days he was tempted by Satan. If you look closely at this passage you should see two different tactics that Satan used in his attempt to defeat God.

The first is found in verse 2 “where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.” Remember, Jesus traveled into the wilderness to prepare for his journey. He wanted to spend time connecting to God in prayer. But Satan tried to disrupt this activity by constantly interfering and interrupting Jesus’ conversation with his Father. How hard must it have been for Him to keep his concentration and focus on God with these constant interruptions?

This same challenge is visible in our own lives today. How many times do you find your mind wandering and losing focus during times of prayer or devotion? You may close your eyes to reduce the temptation, but it never fully leaves. You still think about the task list that’s left undone or the conversation you just finished with a loved one. This is Satan at work as he constantly interrupts our conversations with God in an effort to pull us away. It is this constant interruption that is an attempt to disrupt our relationship.

The second of Satan’s tactics was the actual temptations and reminders of who Jesus was. “If you are the Son of God,” he says. Another way that he could have stated it would have been “You say that you are the Son of God, but no one believes you! Prove it!” And yet Jesus, perfect man and perfect God, overcomes these temptations and interruptions and prepares for his journey.

What about us? As we enter into the season of Lent, our journey to Christ’s cross, we are called to prepare as well, and we can look to Christ as the model for how we are to do it. Sure, we won’t overcome the temptations and interruptions, but we should spend this time focusing our thoughts on God, praying that he will protect us from the devil as we journey through Lent and into Easter.

During Lent, we will be traveling to the cross. But before we go, we will prepare. Like any journey we will grab a suitcase and begin to fill it with memories of all of our sins and all of our failures. We will pack it with reminders of all of the people that we hurt through our words and actions. As we examine our sinful nature, we will continue to fill this suitcase and feel it become heavier and heavier. We will make room for our part that we played in the crucifixion of Jesus and it will weigh us down even more.

And finally, when we can carry no more, we will spend the next weeks unpacking each of these items, reflecting on the pain that each has caused to those around us. We will remind ourselves

that each one was caused by a choice that we made freely. And we will feel terrible as we look through our items.

But here is where we need to cry out to God the most. We need to ask him to protect us from Satan during this dark time of self-reflection. You see, Satan will attack us the same way he attacked Jesus. He will constantly interrupt us in our prayers to God and he will try to tempt us into believing that our suitcase is far too heavy, packed far too much, for the journey. He will tell us that we might as well save what little energy we have left and skip our travel to the cross because it won't be worth it - we will be rejected by Jesus when we arrive. That there is no grace available to us.

This is what he tried with Jesus and he will try it with us. The difference is that we are not perfect, so we must prepare for this battle now – before we leave. We must be in constant prayer, constant communication with God for protection. We must not, cannot, allow Satan to stop us in our journey. Because we must make it. We must get to the cross. We must travel through Lent with our suitcase full of sin, full of worry, and full of shame. We must drag it through these 40 days in constant reminder of what we are carrying and why. And we must make it to the cross.

It is only at the foot of the cross, only once we arrive, where we can set our luggage down, where we can abandon it to God. It is only there where we can exchange it for the righteousness that Jesus earned for us. It is at this place where Jesus waits to take our bags, our sins, and carry them up the cross in our place. And it is only there where he will die and then rise again for our sake.

We must make this journey and the only way we will arrive is by first preparing for it. And so, I end with this: You will need a suitcase and you will be filling it with pain and shame. You will be carrying it to the cross. You know the joy and freedom that waits for you there because you are reminded of it every Easter.

And so, are ready to prepare? Are you ready to call out to God in constant prayer and ask him to protect you from the lies of Satan so that you are not distracted from your Lenten journey?

Are you ready to call out to God in constant prayer to make it to the cross?
Are you ready to call out to God in constant prayer?

Let's start now. Please pray with me.

Jesus,

You were full of the Holy Spirit after baptism and spent 40 days in the wilderness preparing for work that only you could do. For 40 days you were in constant prayer with your Father, our Father building strength and receiving encouragement for the road you knew you had to travel down. Constantly you were distracted by the attempts of Satan to destroy your work before you even began, but he failed. Defeating Satan, you returned from the wilderness and began your long journey to the cross. Closer you walked each day towards a death and separation from God that only you can understand. And you did it all for us. We don't deserve it, don't fully appreciate it, and don't fully understand it, but we stand here today in thanksgiving. As we enter this time of Lent, we remember each time that we failed you, sinned against you, rejected and rebelled against you, and drove you closer to the cross. We ache at the pain that we have caused you and we cry out for forgiveness. Lord, we ask that walk with us as we prepare our hearts for the celebration at Easter when we remember how you set us free. All of this we ask in your name. Amen.