Dear friends, my sermon this morning is about the desert temptations of Jesus. He suffered deep and terrible temptations. So do we. My goal in this sermon is to point to what are called “the disciplines of Lent” to help us to be like Jesus in a world full of temptations.

Here, then, is my opening text:

1And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit 2for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. (Luke 4:1-2, RSV)

Today we find ourselves once again in the church’s season of Lent — a season of spiritual renewal, a season when we should try to walk even more faithfully with Jesus. As you know, Lent begins with Ash Wednesday – not just with ashes, but also with the call to engage in the disciplines of Lent – repentance, fasting, prayer and works of love.

These disciplines are meant to help us fight against evil and resist whatever would lead us away from God and from our neighbors. When we engage in these disciplines we join our Lord Jesus in his battle against the temptations of the devil in the wilderness – a battle that took place immediately after he was baptized and before he began his ministry on earth. Led by the Holy Spirit, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. Jesus resisted the devil’s temptations, which threatened to separate him from God the Father, and from you and me and all those he came to save. Through the disciplines of Lent, we unite with Jesus in this ongoing battle, for the devil still prowls around us like a hungry lion, seeking someone to devour! We must resist that wily devil! We must resist the ways in which Satan tugs on us and tries to pull us away from God and from one another.

Three times Jesus is tempted by the devil, according to St. Luke. What I want to do in this sermon is take a look at each of those three temptations with an eye to how we too are confronted with the same temptations. Let us see how the disciplines of Lent can help us to resist them.
First, Jesus is hungry! He has gone forty days without food! The devil encourages him to satisfy his hunger simply by turning a stone into a loaf of bread. But Jesus will not do it! He quotes scripture – the book of Deuteronomy – saying:

Man shall not live by bread alone. (Deuteronomy 8:3)

If you were to look up that verse you would find that it comes from Israel's time of wandering in the wilderness after their escape from slavery in Egypt. They had been complaining to Moses because there was no food to eat. Moses prayed to the Lord who sent manna – that miraculous bread that appeared every morning like dew on the grass. Moses says to the people, the Lord:

...humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:3 RSV)

Each day the Lord provided manna. It was crucial that the people of God trusted that every morning they would find the manna upon the ground – enough for that day. If they tried to save some for the next day, it would go bad and they could not eat it. Israel had to trust that the Lord would provide for them day by day.

Just as the Lord provided manna in the wilderness, so Jesus multiplied the loaves for the multitudes – four or five thousand at a time. He also changed water into wine at the wedding at Cana. Clearly Jesus could turn a stone into bread, but he would not do it this time. Why? Because Jesus means first off to help others, not himself. Jesus knows that this first temptation is a refocusing of his priorities — a turn away from the neighbor toward himself, and Jesus does not want that. There is nothing wrong with bread. Ordinarily it would be fine for Jesus to satisfy his own hunger. But not this time. Not on these terms. Jesus' compassion for the multitudes includes feeding them because they are hungry. But he will not turn stones into bread for his own benefit. Instead, he will face the harshness of the wilderness with the few resources and the suffering that any of us would face. He means to be content with what his heavenly Father gives him day by day.

Jesus teaches us the same thing in his Lord's Prayer. When we pray: “Give us this day our daily bread.” We pray for bread, but also for contentment. We do not ask for two days of bread, but rather our daily bread. We content ourselves with what God gives us this day. We do not seek miracles and we do not seek unjust ways of making a living.
It seems to me that the corresponding Lenten discipline to our Lord’s desert temptation about bread is fasting. Fasting fights against preoccupation with our own needs. It seeks to break the stranglehold that food and drink can have on us. Fasting may free us from the grip of those things, making us more available to God and to our neighbors. Perhaps fasting is at its best when we give to the poor the money we save by fasting. That way, fasting becomes an act of love toward God and toward our neighbor.

If we engage in fasting – or giving something up for Lent – this practice should help us to remember that everything we have comes from God, and that our abundance is to be shared with those neighbors who live with poverty and hunger. The discipline of fasting is meant to draw us closer to God and to our neighbors too. Just so, we resist the temptation to satisfy only our own needs, while neglecting the needs of others.

In the second temptation, the devil offers Jesus dominion over all the kingdoms of the world, if only he will bow down and worship Satan. Jesus again quotes from Deuteronomy:

You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve. (Deuteronomy 6:5, RSV)

This verse comes from the greatest commandment:

Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 RSV)

Jesus is offered dominion on the devil’s terms, by which he could avoid the cross. The devil says, “You can take over right now, if only you will worship and obey me!” There were those who would have approved if Jesus had become a revolutionary leader. They hoped he would recruit an army to defeat the Romans and take over as king of Israel. But this is not Jesus’ way. Indeed, it is only through his obedience to the Father that Jesus now lives to rule over all of heaven and earth. Rome was not the enemy, nor any other worldly power. No, the enemy Jesus had to contend with was death! Because he did so, he now reigns as Lord of lords and King of kings, for all eternity.

Again, I believe that the disciplines of Lent help us against devilish temptations — in this case, the temptation to take over. “Get out of my way! I mean to take charge here and now. I mean to do things my way!” So the devil whispered to Jesus. “Forget your way of the cross. Take charge now!”
Lenten disciplines help us to resist these ways of the devil – the ways of violence and domination over others. Repentance, prayer and works of love orient us toward God and toward our neighbors, including when the desire to be in control takes over in us. Certainly we all have our areas of expertise and responsibility, but we do not want to use that authority to belittle or dominate over others – or to violate the commandments of God. Jesus’ resisted the need to take charge and instead followed the way of obedience to the Father – which is the way of peace and compassion, charity, forgiveness, sacrifice and love.

In the third temptation the devil goaded Jesus to use God to make him a spectacular wonder worker. “Jump off the pinnacle of the Temple and let all the people see God rescue you!” Jesus again responds by quoting from Deuteronomy:

You shall not tempt the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 6:16)

Jesus wants to win the hearts of men and women, but he does not want to win them through spectacle. Sure, jumping off a high tower and being caught by angels would be pretty fantastic and would catch the attention of lots of people. But that is not how Jesus wants to catch people. Jesus is after their hearts. He is after the best in people. He is after the human desire to be good people, to get back on track, even to take up our cross and follow him in his life of love. Jumping from some pinnacle is irrelevant to that. It is worse than irrelevant. In a way, it is an insult against humanity. It assumes that we cannot be drawn by goodness, but only by spectacle and glory. But Jesus wants us to understand that we are created for good deeds (Ephesians 2:10)\(^1\). We are fashioned by God for love, even though it should mean a cross or some form of self-sacrifice.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus resisted being identified as a miracle worker. He healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, the lame walked, he cast out demons, and he even raised the dead back to life. But very often he told people to go home and say nothing about it to anyone. Jesus did not do these things in order to become a rock star! He did not seek popularity, fame and fortune! He was not interested in the approval or praise of others; he was not out to impress important people, like the Pharisees and scribes. The miracles Jesus performed helped people and revealed to true nature of God’s Kingdom of love.

\(^1\)For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. KJV
Jesus’ emphasis on practicing the disciplines of Lent in secret reminds us that we repent, fast, pray and do good works out of love for God and for our neighbors, and not to win the approval or praise of others or to make ourselves look good. Showing off, Jesus says, is hypocritical. It reveals that we love ourselves more than we love God or our neighbors.

Someday, thanks be to God, we will be done with temptations. In the coming Kingdom of God, there will be no devil to tempt us. And that will be great! That will be an entirely new world for us — a better world. But till then we have this present world in which to shine. We have these days and years granted to us to fight against Satan’s temptations, so that we can follow along faithfully behind our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.