

How Can We Confront the False and Empty?

The love of God gathers us today on our live stream and in this house of worship on land loved by First Nations and others before us, loved by us now and into the future.

This past week, we observed Ash Wednesday as the starting point in our Lenten journey. We marked ourselves with ashes, noting that we all come from love and dust and that we will all return to dust and love – timelessly, eternally intermingled with both.

During this season, that reminder that we are part of something so much larger than we can comprehend somehow paradoxically encourages us to sharpen our focus on the now and here. **Recognizing the precious nature of our time-limited lives, we return year after year to this season of wondering how we might learn to live them really well.** Today we have an opportunity to come alongside Jesus and consider what gets in the way of living well these lives we have been gifted.

I invite you to join your hearts with mine in a moment of prayer. God of the journey, we are grateful to be freely gathered today for a sacred pause that we call worship. It seems that anywhere we turn, we witness false, empty hot air. Those in power try to exert control from a space of insecurity. We witness similar bluster in our neighbors and in ourselves. Crack us open, God. Let that toxic air pour out. Help us to feel deflated enough that we might take in the true, substantive breath of your Holy Spirit. We ask this as followers of Jesus. Let the people say together: Amen. Amen.

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus confronts three different temptations. Scarcity thinking could lure him away from creative abundance thinking.

The smooth shallow water of submission could lure him away from choppy depths of healthy conflict and peacebuilding. And the limits of isolation could lure him away from the complexity of community.

Let's consider how the devil (that is, the unholy spirit of fear) attempted to lure Jesus **away from creative abundance thinking and into scarcity thinking.**

The gospel writer remembered it this way: *"[Jesus] 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.""*

Scarcity thinking would have led Jesus to satisfy his hunger as quickly as possible with the most accessible food regardless of its quality. The spirit of fear told him that he needed to act immediately to satisfy his hunger. When coaxed to forcefully take the stone in front of him and transform it into bread, Jesus recognized that he could access food somehow somewhere as his fasting came to an end.

When I think about how I am lured from creative abundance thinking into scarcity thinking, I think about my time at the gym. For a couple of years at the YMCA, I would spend five to seven days a week saying: I only have like 42 minutes to be in this building right now. So I'm going to get on the machine that I can do for 28 minutes, then get in the shower and get out the door so that I can move on to the next thing. I was full of scarcity thinking – that I was limited in what was possible. Since then, abundance thinking has taught me how to swim. And I am feeling the levity of getting out of my scarcity and limited thinking.

I wonder: in what circumstance in your life do you find yourself lured toward scarcity thinking when Jesus is calling you to creative abundance thinking?

Let's consider how the devil (the unholy spirit of fear) attempted to lure Jesus **away from the choppy depths of healthy conflict and peacebuilding and into the smooth shallow water of submission.**

The story continued: *"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 all this authority and their glory, 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 [God]."'"*

The smooth shallow waters of submission would have led Jesus to compromise his faith-based conviction that he was called to give his ultimate devotion to God alone. The spirit of fear told him to go the easy route of acquiescing to the desire of another to be elevated and praised above all else. Jesus leaned into the choppy depths of healthy conflict and peacebuilding to take pause, examine himself, and say "no" to the spirit of fear.

I don't have a specific example from my own life for this one because I think that a propensity for healthy conflict and peacebuilding basically runs through my entire DNA and I might do well to look sometimes for the smoother, shallower waters of submission. However, **I do wonder if there are circumstances in your life in which you feel yourself lured toward those shallower waters of submission when Jesus is calling you to go deeper into choppy waters – toward healthy conflict and deep peacebuilding.**

Let's finally consider how the devil (that is, the unholy spirit of fear) attempted to lure Jesus **away from the complexity of community and into the limits of isolation.**

The story continued: *"Then the devil led him to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "[God] 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."'"*

The limits of isolation would have led Jesus to stay within his own narrow field of vision. The spirit of fear told him he was alone on that pinnacle. But Jesus leaned into the complexity of community to trust that he would have support on the journey forward and down from that pinnacle.

I do have an example for this one because I can have limited narrow vision. I've both been compared to a motorboat that needs to be aware of what's in its wake and noted as having a checklist mentality. I can tend to have a checklist of what I think might come next – what action, what next good step. And I can have the blinders on and think that I am alone in something. And yet all around me is the complex possibility of community.

So I wonder: in what circumstance in your life might you be lured toward the limits of isolation when Jesus is calling you into the complexity of community.

The good news amidst all these temptations in our lives is that we have the present moment in which to grow toward Jesus' ways.

In his devotional “Our Spiritual Attention Spans,” Rev. Rob Fredrickson said this after explaining that the root meaning of Lent is lengthen – he wrote, *“Lent comes when the daylight per day is literally lengthening in the northern hemisphere. And the season’s duration reminds us that great things often emerge over great spans of time... Are we up to the task of lengthening our spiritual attention spans? Are we open to the possibility that God is calling us to something long-term—a journey, a quest, a goal, a paradigm shift, a pilgrimage?”*

I wonder: how might you take one concrete step this Lent toward expanding your “spiritual attention span”?

The story about Jesus feeling tempted in the middle of the wilderness, in broad strokes, seems to be about the lure to take easy ways out instead of gritty growth-filled ways of life.

On the heels of International Women’s Day, I would like to close with another brief poem by Nikiti Gill (Irish-Indian poet, playwright, and illustrator) about faith in action on the way forward. I invite you to close your eyes if helps you to hear it more clearly. She writes about justice:

*“The rage you are feeling
comes from the same place
inside your heart as the love.*

*This is why you refuse to accept a world
where cruelty reigns and the fire consumes all.*

*You have known hope
and joy and kindness
like you have known water.*

*And justice is a river
that demands
you do not give up on it.”*

Friends: may we lean away from the lure of scarcity thinking and into creative abundance thinking.

May we lean away from the smooth shallow water of submission and into the choppy depths of healthy conflict and peacebuilding.

And may we lean away from the limits of isolation and into the complexity of community – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Luke 4: 1-13, “Our Spiritual Attention Spans”