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More motivated than ever

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The Peace Pulpit

As we begin our reflection on the word of God today, I think it's important for us to remind ourselves of why we have this season of Lent, this period of 40 days of prayer and fasting.

Of course it is, first of all, to enter, in a very deep and special way, the experience of Jesus, who himself, after he is filled with the holy spirit, goes out into the desert for these six weeks of prayer and fasting, to try to enter into a deeper union with God, but also for Jesus to understand more deeply what God is calling him to.

You may remember that at the baptism, Jesus when he experienced the outpouring of the holy spirit, he heard God saying deep in his heart, "You are my beloved, the chosen servant. In you I am well pleased," Those were the first words of the 40th chapter of the book of Isaiah, where this servant of God is called to bring true justice to the nations, to have fulfilled the mission of God, to make everything right, but to do it in a very special way: "You will not call to arms, not break the bruised reed, quench the wavering flame." In other words, this servant is to bring true justice only through nurturing and love.

It's a very difficult and obviously very challenging call that's given to Jesus to bring true justice, to transform our world into the reign of God, but to do it not through power and force, but through the nurturing **First Sunday of Lent** Jesus is in the desert and praying, he is tempted to turn away from that call of God. So we try now to enter into these six weeks of Lent in union with Jesus so that by our fasting, we will experience a deeper hunger for God, and that by our fasting and our prayer, we will be in deeper solidarity with the starving people of the world.

At this Lent, I know that I am more deeply motivated than I've ever been to enter into this special time of prayer in union with Jesus because of my experience this past week in Haiti.

Luke 4:1-13

Full text of the readings

A week ago Friday was the first month anniversary of that terrible earthquake, and the President of Haiti, President Préval, called the people to come together, not as they usually would do at this time of the year in Carnival, in celebrations before Lent, but to come together and pray profoundly and deeply, and to fast. The people did that for three days last weekend, and I can hardly imagine that it would mean for a person in Haiti to fast because they are so lacking in food and everything they need. Yet for three days, they filled the open square in the downtown part of Port-au-Prince in the thousands and tens of thousands of people, praying, singing and committing themselves to fasting.

Certainly, as I said, for me this is a profound motivation to be more like those people of Haiti, to try to unite myself more deeply with Jesus during this season of Lent, through prayer and fasting, and to come to understand through that prayer and fasting, more deeply what these temptations of Jesus are and how they are still temptations in our lives. The first thing, as you recall, what the devil says to Jesus: "Turn these stones into bread. Have all the wealth of the world that you wish. If you are the Son of God, that would be nothing. You can use that wealth to bring about God's reign," but that wasn't the way of God. So Jesus says, "No. It's not by bread alone that you live, but by listening deeply to every word that comes from the mouth of God," to nurture yourself in spirit through God's word, to live a life of simplicity and poverty, rather than a life of consumption and wealth.

That first lesson this morning reminds us of why it is so important to have a spirit of simplicity, not to be committed to the accumulation of wealth and overconsumption. In that first lesson, the chosen people are instructed to bring to God the first fruits of all their produce, to acknowledge from the very beginning as they begin to reap their harvest of bounty, to take the first fruits and bring them to God to remind themselves that everything they have comes from God, and everything they have belongs to God; so they give it back, indicating they are willing to share what they have, not accumulate, not become rich, wealthy, and consume far more than is their right. This is what Jesus is teaching us through that rejection of the devil's offer to him to have all the wealth in the world he wants.

In this next temptation as Luke tells it, Jesus is shown all the kingdoms of the earth: "Have power, use that power to have your way, to dominate, to control," and it is so easy for us to fall into that temptation, that through power we can make things happen, forgetting that nothing can be done through us unless God continues to sustain us with God's love and God's support, and that instead of power, we need to reach out in love, nurture, draw people, transform the world through that generous love that Jesus shows us by giving his whole self into suffering and even death to bring about life. Jesus doesn't need prestige or to be a wonder worker: "Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple so everyone will be in amazement." No, it isn't that; it's a very humble Jesus who is shown to us, who rejects that kind of arrogance and presumption, and instead walks the earth in a very humble and simple way.

So we too try to, in our own lives, reflect what Jesus does. This is why we celebrate this period of Lent, so that through prayer, through fasting which makes us hunger more deeply for God, we can be more closely united with Jesus. That means, in our personal lives, to be willing to share ever more generously the abundance of material goods that we have, and it would mean, I think, for us as a nation, to refuse to continue as we do, to try to protect for ourselves in an excessive way, the goods of the earth. We are 5 percent of the world's people (even less than that now), but we still consume, use for ourselves, over 25 percent of the world's wealth.

We try to use power to maintain our ability to accumulate this wealth of the world for ourselves. Why else do we have over 1,000 military bases in 130 countries of the world? It isn't because we have to defend ourselves from being attacked, but it's because we want to protect our access to the resources of the planet for ourselves. So not only do we have to undergo change as individuals, we have to try to promote a

change in our national attitudes, to give up war and power and violence, to give up our desire to accumulate the wealth of the world and overconsume that wealth of the world beyond anything we have a right to.

This is what we would begin to do as a nation if we really listened deeply to God's word today. Jesus is tempted, not to follow the way God has opened up to him, that way of nurturing love, but rather to use wealth and power and prestige. Jesus says no to that and this is what we must try to do ourselves during the season of Lent, deepen our awareness of the call of Jesus to bring true justice, true peace to the world, but to do it through God's way, and not through the way of power, the way of wealth, the way of prestige.

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Each of us, I hope, for myself and for all of us, will try to enter deeply into this season of Lent, reflect deeply on those temptations of Jesus, and understand how they are temptations that continue to draw us, tempt us. Luke tells us that the Devil left Jesus for a time, but he kept coming back, and the same things happens in our lives, so every year, we must enter into this time of renewal, this time of prayer, this time of fasting so that we can be more closely united with Jesus, follow his way and reject those temptations. Again, I remind you of what I experienced this week with the people of Haiti. So deeply committed are they to prayer and fasting, these people who are starving, yet willing to follow the lead of their nation's leaders and follow the way of Jesus, the way of fasting and prayer and love.

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