



Gary Lewis offered us a wonderful image and metaphor on Wednesday at our evening Ash Wednesday service.

The Unclaimed Baggage Center, located between Huntsville, Alabama and Chattanooga, Tennessee really does exist. You can check it out on the internet. It looks like a fun place to visit and shop if you are in that part of the country.

Gary's point, though, was that some baggage needs to stay unclaimed. Some baggage shouldn't be put up for resale or resurrection. Some baggage needs to be given to Jesus and left with Jesus. After all, if we take our baggage back from Jesus, then what is the meaning of Christ's life, death and resurrection?

Our Great Litany- or translated, the Great Prayer- is a reminder on this first Sunday in Lent that we have begun the journey towards Holy Week and Easter. We have a defined period of time: 40 days and nights to consider our lives; to consider our values; to consider where we need amendment of life. Lent is a journey, not a destination.

Jesus was baptized by John, filled with the Holy Spirit, and immediately led into the wilderness. A time of retreat and reflection. Forty days and nights where Jesus pondered how his life had been changed by his baptism and how his journey into public ministry might take shape.

Jesus was faced with temptation. What values would he follow in the next phase of his life? Would he value food- bread offered by the devil? Would he value power or worship God which then -and now- sometimes although rarely means worldly power? Would he value safety or undertake a ministry that ultimately meant his death?

Matt Souza was the Ethics Officer for Irwin Financial Corporation for nearly 25 years. He led training around ethics for the company's employees and drew a distinction between temptation and dilemma. A temptation, he said, was a choice between a right and a wrong. The issue was were you going to choose the right when it had consequences, some of which were might be negative, when the wrong was often easier and might even be perceived as safer. A dilemma, though, was a choice between two options, both of which seemed to be right. Which right choice did you choose was the topic of conversation in the training classes.

Jesus faced temptation in that the choice offered by the devil violated the values Jesus held. There was a right and a wrong. But the wrong surely looked pretty good. To choose the bread was not bad in-and-of itself. We need bread- or food- to survive as human beings. But to choose the bread the devil offered was to choose a life that depended upon our own efforts rather than a life focused on God. To choose the bread the devil offered was to ignore God's provision of manna to the people of Israel wandering in the desert. To choose the bread the devil offered is to believe that we can provide better sustenance that God can. Jesus is the bread of life upon which we depend.

The second temptation Jesus faced was the offer of worldly power and glory. Tempting to be sure to have honor and riches and affirmation from those around us. But for anyone who has been through a corporate downsizing, you realize how fleeting worldly power and glory can be. Again, power and glory are not necessarily evil or wrong in-and-of-themselves. How one perceives and uses the power and glory bestowed by the world is where people go off the rails. Think about how many pastors have been flying high, lots of public adulation, only to be brought low through their sins. Public humiliation and sometimes even jail time. Focusing on what the world offers in terms of glory and power can have devastating consequences. Focusing on what God offers us leads to eternal life.

Many of us have prayed at some point: "If only you will do this, God, I will do that." We think that if only God will save us from this or that trial, we will amend our life. The reality is that as soon as we perceive the trial is over, we forget what we promised God. We test God over and over again as if the roulette wheel is finally going to stop at a spot where we will have the upper hand over God. We will rake in the chips, cash out a windfall and go on our merry way. But remember that God doesn't answer to us. We answer to God.

What values did Jesus discern during his wilderness retreat? God is the source of life and supplies all our needs. Probably not all our wants, but all our needs. This does not mean that life is an easy street. There are too many who are hungry and homeless and in desperate need of a caring friend. It does mean that God is present with us regardless of our circumstances.

Jesus discerned that what and who we worship matters. As Leonell Mitchell wrote, praying shapes believing. What we believe we pray. What we pray we believe. That's one reason we pray during the darkest night of the soul. It is something that keeps us focused on God even when we are in the deepest despair. Worship and prayer help keep us in relationship with the source of all creation no matter our circumstances.

The third temptation tells us that God is God and we are not. We do not tell God what to do (or perhaps more easily said, we can tell God what we want but we cannot compel God to answer our prayers as we have demanded). The third temptation sets us in right relationship with God. Yes, God has created us a little lower than the angels. But God is God and we are not.

The end of the passage from Luke is also worth our noting. “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until and opportune time.” As much as it would be nice to believe “whew, I passed those temptations and now it’s clear sailing”, we are reminded that an opportune time will come for Jesus and it will come for us.

We only have to recall Holy Week – Palm Sunday to Good Friday- to be reminded that an opportune time came for the devil to once again confront Jesus. Would Jesus deny who and whose he was to avoid Calvary? Would Peter acknowledge he was a follower of Jesus and risk being crucified alongside him? For us, our time to stand up and be counted as a follower of Jesus may come today or tomorrow – or it may be years in the future. At some point, however, we, too, will be asked: who do you follow?

And what does it mean to us in this 21st century to be a follower of Jesus?
It means that we can leave that baggage with Jesus in the unclaimed baggage center. We don’t have to pick it up again –ever.

It means that Lent offers us a chance to revisit our values as informed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We have our own time of spiritual retreat and reflection. We have our own time to consider- and then to answer- the temptations put to Jesus and to us.

Lent is often a time when people give things up. A time of giving up to allow space for something else. A time of giving up in order to refocus on what matters most.

Earlier this week I sent out a Google-groups message with the suggestion that we ought to give up empty pews for Lent. Studies show that more than 70% of people come to church because someone they knew asked them to come. Several of you responded with wonderful anecdotes about who asked you to come to St. John’s. Knowing that, your Lenten challenge is to help us give up empty pews for Lent.

Scientists tell us that it takes about 30 days for a new habit to form. We still have time to invite our neighbors and friends to join us at St. John’s for worship on Sunday morning or Wednesday noon or evening. We still have time for those neighbors and friends to form a new habit – and maybe the pews will stay full even after Lent 2013 fades to a memory. Please, give it a try- as someone asked you to come, reach out and ask another.

If one of your hopes and dreams for St. John’s is growth and a full-house, it will take your reaching out to a neighbor or friend and inviting them to join us. Your Lenten discipline is not a giving up but an asking out. Turn your hope and dream into reality by taking action. Ask a friend to church. You might be surprised at who says yes!

Jesus waits for us – and for all those friends and neighbors- to learn from our time of retreat and reflection this Lenten season. To discern that our true bread is Jesus, not the world. To discern that worldly power and glory fade while worship of God provides a firm foundation upon which a strong and useful life can be built. To discern that God is God and we are not – but the truly good news of the Gospel is that God loves us and

walks with us regardless of what the world does to us. That, in the words of a song from childhood,

What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer.¹

Lent is a time of prayer. Of discernment. Of action. Follow the example of Jesus. Be aware of the temptations set before you. Respond believing in the God who created us and claims us as God's own. *Amen.*

¹ <http://www.hymnsite.com/lyrics/umh526.sht> (Feb. 15, 2013)