

Led up by the Spirit
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First Lesson: Romans 5:12-19

¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— ¹³sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

¹⁵ But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. ¹⁶And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Second Lesson: Matthew 4:1-11

¹Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' ⁴But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' '

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' '

⁷Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' '

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'

¹⁰Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' '

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

When we read "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil," we may think that the Spirit was to blame, as if there was some coercion or trickery. After all, couldn't the Spirit have taken him to a nice well or into town just as easily? Rather than seeing the Spirit as one with a nefarious plan, realize that the Spirit had just come to Jesus at his baptism, descending like a dove and alighting on him. The Spirit never left him and now accompanies him into this testing in the wilderness. For some of us the wilderness is where we want to go to get away from it all; for faithful Israelites it was

not a good place; more specifically, it was a place of struggle. Remember it's where their people wandered for forty years after escaping Pharaoh.

Indeed, the wilderness was to be a place of struggle for Jesus, too, and the Spirit went with him; from the initial establishing of Jesus's authority at his baptism to what we might call "part two" of the establishing of his authority. In his baptism, God declared "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." From this we know by word that Jesus is the one to listen to; now it is time to know by deed. Part two.

How does he do this? We read that Jesus is tempted to satisfy his hunger, to save himself from danger, and to have dominion over the world. The subtext in all of these temptations is power. Jesus is tempted to exercise his own power but, showing his authority as God's Beloved obedient one, he replies each time that God's power is sufficient for him. "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only." In these responses to the tempter, in these responses which are an example for us, Jesus tells us we do not need to, nor should we, rely on our own power because God's power is sufficient. I've said it from here before – I struggle with this. On my map, that wilderness area over there, that wilderness is in the region named "Control." I was raised to be independent, self-sufficient, a planner and a thinker and a controller of my own destiny. And Jesus tells me, "This way is even better." But I know my way and it takes away enough fears and worries to give me a sense of equilibrium. Jesus says, "This way is even better."

Our reading of Paul's letter to the Romans compares, in a number of ways, Adam and Christ. He repeatedly talks about trespass and the free gift. If you sat in the pews of another church this morning, you might be saying "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." That might make you solely equate trespass to our "debt." These words have many equivalencies, though, one of which is "sin," all of which are another way of saying "turning away from God." How does this all connect to our reading from Matthew? The surest way to turn away from God is to tell God that we have this whole thing down, under control. When we do *that*, we trespass on God's power; we claim what can only be God's as our own. If we keep our boundaries, admitting our powerlessness, admitting where our power ends, then there is a return to righteousness. Righteousness is right relation with God – we let God be God and that is right relation, that is the right proportion of power between us both.

The "free gift" that is a counter to trespass then is grace that is both freely given by Christ and also **freedom-giving**. Jesus says, "This way is even better." I may know in my theological head that admitting I don't have the control I think I have is far better, but my emotional and fearful heart clings to what I know so far. After all, I've known times when things weren't quite as under my control and right

now, now that they are, it feels much better. Sorry, Jesus you'll have to try harder to convince me another way is better. I forget that the most recent bout of "lack of control" opened me up to God's Spirit moving and brought me here. I have forgotten the relief I felt when I finally acknowledged that there was nothing I could do to control the situation but only welcome new things as they unfolded. I've forgotten.

But now it is Lent. It is Lent and I remember in the process of urging you to remember that we must, must, die to ourselves, to our old selves and our old ways, to be born through Christ and in Christ. To really experience Easter resurrection, we work through Lent to shed those ways, those habits, those things that reinforce our old patterns of grabbing and grasping at control so that we might welcome the free gift of grace that is both freely given and freedom-giving. We begin this Lenten season with Jesus' assurance. You **can** survive the very real powerlessness of this world and this is how: when you are tempted by opportunities for power, whether they be day-to-day or once-in-a-lifetime, remember that God has the power and you are better off for it. It's so easy to say and not so easy to live – that is why we practice. We practice in these forty days and seven Sundays to lean into God's power instead of trespassing upon it. We practice not so we can quickly stop our practice come Easter Monday but so we might be better prepared to continue to live into that which we have been practicing. We practice so we can join Jesus in saying, "This way is even better" and spread that good news. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Help us remember, O God, that you are God and we are not. Help us remember that your way is even better. Amen.