

February 10, 2008
Why Jesus?
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Matthew 4:1-11

(Matthew 4:1-11 NRSV) Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. {2} He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. {3} The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." {4} But 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, {6} saying 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.'" {7} Jesus 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; {9} and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." {10} Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" {11} Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Last Wednesday was the beginning of the Season of Lent.

I don't want to assume that we all understand what the season of Lent is all about.

Lent is the 40 day period leading up to Easter — the day we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

But why — why do we have this season and what are we supposed to do with it.

First of all, the purpose of this season is to prepare us for what it means to follow a resurrected Jesus. Lent is a season of soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock.

Lent originated in the very earliest days of the Church as a preparatory time for Easter, when the faithful rededicated themselves and when converts were instructed in the faith and prepared for baptism. Then, at the Easter Vigil, the first service of Easter, they would be baptized and welcomed into the faith.

One of the questions that you may be asking is: Why 40 days? Especially because if I count the days it doesn't add up.

First, 40 days are the days excluding Sundays that take us to Easter. We don't count Sundays because ----

well it doesn't work if we count them
and we see the Sundays as little Easter's

But why 40, why not 47 since that is really the number of days.

That is much easier —

40 is an important number in the Bible

It rained during the time of Noah for 40 days

Moses was on the Mountain getting the Torah for 40 days

Moses and the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40
years eating the manna God provided

When Joshua and the spies checked out the land they did it for 40 days

When Elijah fled from Ahab and Jezebel he fasted for 40 days

Maximum number of lashes that can be given out — 40

How long did the people of Nineveh have to repent when Jonah visited
40 days

Resurrected Jesus walked earth before ascension 40 days

So, is it surprising, that when the early church was creating it's sacred calendar that the number 40 was used.

NOT AT ALL

Matthew loves to show how Jesus is the new Moses

Indeed, if Lent had not been for a period of forty days we should really be surprised.

Over these forty days we are going to ponder some difficult and perplexing questions. And as we look at these stories — my hunch is that more often than not we are not going to answer the questions that we set out to do — instead as is often the case we are going to be left with many mysteries. But that is OK, we really don't need to answer all the questions — we need to learn to embrace the mystery — not blindly but with honest eyes and hearts.

Today we begin with WHY JESUS?

Why did Jesus have to go to Jerusalem?

Why did Jesus have to die?

At the time that Jesus lived — in what we call the 1st Century, this was a time of great unrest in the middle east.

Judea — the land of the Jews was ruled by a pretender king that we know of as Herod the Great.

Herod was not from the line of David

He was not fully Jewish

— he was an Idumaeen (known as Edom in the Hebrew Bible)

Herod, and his sons who followed him were client kings of Rome

The Jewish people were searching for a Messiah — the chosen one of God who was of the line of David who would restore the nation — make the nation great like it had been before the Babylonian conquest 500 years earlier.

Isaiah, writing during the exile, writes about what the Jewish Messiah will be, and what the Messiah will accomplish. If you want to understand what the Jewish people were looking for in the Messiah, you need to read and study the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel very carefully.

In the years before and after Jesus — many people claimed to be the Messiah.

But why Jesus?

The easy answer is: Because he was the Messiah!

But remember, that during his lifetime, not many people chose to follow him, instead many saw him as a troublemaker and a rebel rouser.

Jesus is a figure from history that we can know a good deal about.

- We know that he grew up in the Galilee
- That as a man he began to preach a radical gospel to his fellow Jews
- That he could perform amazing acts in which people could see God
 - ▶ that he enabled people to experience abundant life
- that he had an amazing experience of God
- that he preached that this experience was not just for the Jews but for everybody
- That he felt compelled to go to Jerusalem, and that when he was there he was executed by the Roman authorities

But is most interesting is what the early church did to the Jesus experience

They began to understand Jesus in a way that the Jewish people did not — that Jesus was the Messiah of God — chosen to usher in a new age.

But the problem that they faced was: HOW COULD THE MESSIAH DIE?

So they began to understand the death of Jesus in a new way.

They began to understand the death of Jesus as fore-ordained by God

They began to understand the death of Jesus as necessary by God

That Jesus through his death and resurrection opened up a door to God that does not exist without him

We will talk more about that on Easter Sunday.

But today the question is why Jesus?

For me the answer is WHY NOT JESUS?

Our text this morning is taken from the Gospel of Matthew. This story is found in the other synoptic Gospels, and is very brief in Mark's Gospel.

It takes place right after Jesus is baptized by John.

It is almost as if Matthew is wanting to demonstrate quite clearly that even though Jesus has said YES to God — will he really remain faithful to his call?

Matthew 4:1-11 (The Message)

Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it. Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test: "Since you are God's Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread."

Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth."

After this prolonged fast, Jesus is understandably hungry. The devil in the story attempts to exploit Jesus weakened physical state by suggesting that if he is really God's Son, he should simply turn some of the nearby stones into bread.

Remember the manna in the wilderness? This temptation may allude to it.

The devil seems to be suggesting that just as God took care of his “son” Israel, so, too, as God’s Son should Jesus employ his divine powers to similarly feed himself.

Jesus offers a simple scriptural retort. He seems to be suggesting by quoting from Moses that he will not grumble or complain like the Israelites did when they faced material lack in the wilderness.

For the second test the Devil took him to the Holy City. He sat him on top of the Temple and said, "Since you are God's Son, jump." The Devil goaded him by quoting Psalm 91: "He has placed you in the care of angels. They will catch you so that you won't so much as stub your toe on a stone."

Jesus countered with another citation from Deuteronomy: "Don't you dare test the Lord your God."

Having failed to appeal to Jesus’ basic physical needs, the devil decides to goad Jesus into showing off his divine powers. This time he mystically transports Jesus up to the “pinnacle” of the temple in Jerusalem.

The devil recognizes that Jesus is God’s Son (which had been publically asserted at his baptism) the devil suggests that Jesus should be able to jump off the pinnacle of the temple because Psalm 91:11 says that God would send angels to rescue him.

Jesus once again quotes Moses in which he recalls Israel’s rebellious complaints at Massah in the wilderness. In that story the groaning of the Israelites prompted God to provide a miraculous source of water (much like a harassed father who finally gives in to a whining child’s request), Jesus will not make demands on how and when God should act; Jesus will not put God “to the test” as the Israelites had in the wilderness.

For the third test, the Devil took him to the peak of a huge mountain. He gestured expansively, pointing out all the earth's kingdoms, how glorious they all were. Then he said, "They're yours—lock, stock, and barrel. Just go down on your knees and worship me, and they're yours."

Jesus' refusal was curt: "Beat it, Satan!" He backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: "Worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness."

The Test was over. The Devil left. And in his place, angels! Angels came

and took care of Jesus' needs.

Having been rebuffed twice, the devil puts all his chips on the table.

Once again mystically, he takes Jesus up to a “very high mountain” where they are able to survey “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor”. He then flat-out offers Jesus dominion over all that they can see if he will worship him.

Jesus offers a sharp rebuke (his first non scriptural utterance of the encounter), telling “Satan” to scram. Jesus does cite one final verse from Moses: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him”.

When the devil has finally departed, angels come and attend Jesus, just as Elijah had been taken care of by angels when he was on the brink of death in the wilderness.

This becomes a key moment in the definition and shape of Jesus’ divine sonship.

Would he exploit his status for material goods or political power, or would he remain humbly obedient to God’s mission for his life?

And because Jesus can do this — so can you and I.

Why Jesus?

Because: Jesus opens up for you and me a WAY
 A way of knowing and experiencing God
 A way that leads to life — abundant life

CHRISTPOWER

Lucy Negus

Look at him!

Look not at his divinity,
 but look, rather, at his freedom.

Look not at the exaggerated tales of his power,
 but look, rather, at his infinite capacity to give himself away.

Look not at the first-century mythology that surrounds him,
 but look, rather, at his courage to be,
 his ability to live, and

the contagious quality of his love.

Stop your frantic search!

Be still and *know* that this is God:

this love,
this freedom,
this life,
this being:

And,
when you are accepted, accept yourself;
when you are forgiven, forgive yourself;
when you are loved, love yourself.
Grasp that Christpower
and dare to be
yourself!