

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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February 21, 2010  
*1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent*  
Luke 4:1-13

### **Practicing My Essence**

As of today the 2010 Winter Olympics are at the halfway point. It was just a week ago Friday that the opening ceremonies were held with all of the grandeur and national pride swelling in each of the athletes who paraded into the arena. There's something breathtaking about the hope and optimism with which these athletes present themselves after years of preparation and anticipation. The opening ceremony is by definition devoid of the thrill of victory and disappointment of defeat that fills the Olympic venues from the beginning of the first events right up to the closing ceremonies. But this year the customary unbridled optimism was tempered by the shock over the tragic death earlier that day of the Georgian luger, Nodar Kumaritashvili, who died on a training run down the harrowing luge course. His death shined the spotlight on the amazing level of commitment that goes into the preparation of Olympic athletes as they work their way toward this ultimate test of their physical prowess and athletic mettle. Looking into it more deeply, it turns out that there are numerous serious accidents, some resulting in severe injury, in the months, weeks and days leading up to the opening of any of the winter or summer Olympic games. Again, a testimony to the incessant practice and preparation that sets these Olympians apart from other competitive athletes. The results of the those who become medalists speak for themselves, and the victors become inspiring icons for the world.

The Olympics remind us that there's truth in the old proverb that practice makes perfect. And this of course applies to all aspects of our living from the personal to the professional as well as from the physical to the spiritual. So it's fitting for us to have these winter Olympics as a backdrop as we begin the season of Lent in the church. Lent is that 40-day period leading up to Easter Sunday, which this year is on April 4. Working backwards from Easter leads to a Wednesday known as Ash Wednesday which was this last Wednesday. Traditionally then from Ash Wednesday until the day before Easter the focus is on penitence, sacrifice and self-examination. Many of you may remember or still practice this through the discipline of giving something up for Lent as part of that preparation for Easter. More recently in the last few decades Lent has taken on a slightly different focus, with an emphasis on study and prayer. It's this focus that we'll be promoting during these 6 weeks of Lent this year. More specifically, we'll be emphasizing the importance of practice, practice, practice. This focus on practice is a natural extension of our focus on the marks of discipleship last fall before the Advent and Christmas holidays. So, as then, we'll be advocating for the living out our faith through some very intentional practices.

According to the gospel of Luke Jesus began his ministry with a 40-day period of preparation. His 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and praying, provide the template for the 40 days of Lent that we observe. We read that for those 40 days Jesus was tempted by the devil. It's important right at the beginning here to point out that Luke's making mention of the devil is not a reference to a proper name. The word, "devil," here describes more the one who throws things around. The devil here is understood to be those forces or impulses that if acted on may lead one astray. And it's not surprising that as a 40-day fast proceeds, the desire for sustenance and for companionship and influence would increase as

the days and weeks wear on. It would be the ideal situation in which those pressures and temptations would take on added strength and power.

It's at the end of this 40-day fast that the story picks up when we read about three specific temptations that are put in front of Jesus. While there are 3 that are mentioned in detail, let's not forget that according to Luke Jesus has been facing temptation throughout his wilderness experience. Presumably Jesus would be at his weakest at the end of a 6-week fast where he has been resisting temptations the whole time. So let's take a look at these 3 specific temptations that Jesus encounters and see just how he resists them.

The first temptation speaks to the immediate hunger that was wrenching Jesus' body at the end of his fast, but more broadly to the physical hunger that plagues the world. The temptation to take the stones that were so plentiful and abundant and transform them into bread must have been enticing not only for the breakfast it could provide his own body but also for the way in which the poor of his day could be satisfied. For in Jesus' time there were the very rich, a very small minority of the people, and the very poor, the overwhelming majority of the people. How easy it could be for Jesus who was being offered the means to bring about this needed radical change in the economics of the first century. But Jesus resists and remains steadfast to who he is. For as a faithful and devout Jew Jesus had been immersed in the Hebrew scriptures during his years of being raised within the Jewish community. And so with the power of the scriptures that were a part of his very being he resists by quoting from those scriptures in Deuteronomy, "One does not live by bread alone." (Lk. 4:4) In resisting this temptation Jesus remains true to who he is.

The second temptation is to exercise political and governmental power over the kingdoms of the world. Jesus could use his divine power to rule the world in a way that would bring about success and influence across the earth. The political situation in the known world of Jesus' day was complex, tumultuous and downright messy. In a nutshell, the people of God—the Jews—were living under occupation, subject to the whims of leaders who had no interest in the God of Israel. There was an impatience among the Jewish people who were ready to be freed of the bondage of occupation. They were ready to once again be a people who were the rulers rather than the ruled. Jesus, of course, was a Jew who had been raised in this milieu and would have understood firsthand the frustration and pain of his people. How tempting indeed it would have been for him to succumb to this idea that he could use his power to become that very ruler. But Jesus resists and remains steadfast to who he is. And it is again with the power of those scriptures that he resists this temptation when he quotes from the book of Deuteronomy a second time, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." (Lk. 4:8) In voicing this quotation, Jesus was remembering who he is and who God is—namely the only true focus of devotion and worship. To have succumbed to the temptation before him would have been a betrayal of who he is.

The third and last temptation was for Jesus to demonstrate in a visible and compelling way to his own faith community—the Jewish establishment—that he has the divine power and wherewithal to supplant the ingrained and entrenched leadership that had lost its purity and inspired focus. How easy it would be for Jesus to do an end run around the Jewish leaders and bring about the needed changes by compelling executive order—his executive order! How easy and efficient this would be. But it would also be done

in such a way that is not in keeping with scripture. Even though this time, the tempter uses the very words of scripture to entice Jesus, he again quotes from Deuteronomy, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” (Lk. 4:12) Jesus, for a third time, remains true to who he is and who God has called him to be.

In all three of these temptations, Jesus benefits from the years of practice he had put in place as he learned the scriptures inside and out so that they became a part of the very lifeblood coursing through his veins. Jesus demonstrates three times in response to the tempter that as a result of his having practiced, practiced and practiced his faith, he is able to steadfastly remember who he is and what God’s call is for him.

Noted Presbyterian pastor, Michael A. Lindvall, writes of Jesus overcoming the temptations. “Three times he remembers sacred words that he knows like the back of his hand. And three times he is strengthened by remembering. Jesus resisted temptation by reaching deep into the tradition, the long heritage of faith that teaches us what matters most.” (“Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem,” session 1, p. 3. ©2007 [www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com](http://www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com))

As disciples of Jesus we’re called to practice our faith in the way that Jesus models for us. When we think back to those 6 marks of discipleship: pray daily, worship weekly, read the Bible regularly, serve at and beyond the local church, develop relationships that nurture your spiritual life and that of others, and give of your time, talent and resources, we discover that they provide the very framework for us to nurture within ourselves the wherewithal and tenacity to persevere in the face of competing priorities.

Practice obedience to God alone. Practice, practice, practice. When we do that we’ll discover that the essence of our very being is found in our life as a child of God. It is this essence that is our identity to which are subsidiary all of the other identifying categories we may have about us. I’m a Christian first and foremost. I’m a Christian first, and then a parent. I’m a Christian first, and then a child. I’m a Christian first, and then a worker. I’m a Christian first, and then a member of any other organization. I’m a Christian first and then a Presbyterian! Practice, practice, practice.

Again, we can take a cue from those Olympic athletes who have been wowing us during these Winter games. But unlike those competitors who are seeking to win the one and only gold medal that is offered in each category, the pinnacle to which we strive in our tenacious practice of the faith is miraculously big enough with room for all of God’s people. God’s generous and inclusive love and grace are sufficient for all who are striving and seeking to follow. So practice, practice, practice obedience to God alone, and like in our savior Jesus before us, our essence will shine and will be the foundation upon which we live and move and have our very being.