

2.21.2021 First Sunday in Lent (Matthew 4:1-11)

In the year 1860, a group of 19 men set out on an expedition to cross Australia from Melbourne in the south, to the Gulf of Carpentaria in the north, a distance of approximately 2,000 miles. While many things were learned and much was gained through this great endeavor, far more was lost, because by the end of the expedition seven men died, and only one man, John King, crossed the continent with the explorers and returned alive to Melbourne.

One of the men who perished was William John Wills, the navigator, surveyor, and third-in-command. Historians tell us that when Wills and the leader of the expedition, Robert Burke, had exhausted their food supply, they began to eat seedcakes made from the nardoo plant. While this food filled their stomachs and satisfied their hunger, the men grew weaker and more emaciated every day, until they eventually died of starvation. Shortly before his death, Wills wrote these words in his diary: “My pulse is at 48 and very weak, and my legs and arms are nearly skin and bone... but starvation on nardoo is by no means unpleasant... for as the appetite is concerned, it gives me the greatest satisfaction.”

There are different theories as to why the nardoo plant didn't nourish these men. Some say that they were preparing it improperly, others believe it depleted their bodies of necessary nutrients, but no matter the specific cause of their starvation, one thing is clear: Even though they ate and were satisfied, these men wasted away. They died of starvation with full stomachs.

The season of Lent is a time for self-examination. Lent is an opportunity for us to reflect on our own disordered appetites for those things that fill us up, that give us the greatest satisfaction, but leave our spiritual pulse at 48 and our souls growing weaker and more emaciated every day. This world, and especially our society, is full of what you might call “nardoo,” the many activities and distractions that fill up our days, evenings, and weekends to the point where our lives are so busy, and so full of “*the food that perishes*,” that there's little room left for what really nourishes us, that which our Lord offers, the “*food that endures to eternal life*” (John 6:26-27).

We face a constant temptation to fill our lives with something infinitely less than *“every good and perfect gift”* (James 1:17) our Father so graciously offers us. We struggle to control our appetite for the things of this world, yet in the Gospel passage we read today, when Jesus had fasted 40 days and 40 nights and was confronted with a similar temptation, the temptation to break that fast and disobediently turn stones into bread, He responded to the enemy with these words, *“It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:4).

Our Lord responded to each of the three temptations He faced at that time by quoting Scripture, and we’ll have a more complete understanding of the truth He intends to communicate by quoting this particular verse if we take a moment to consider these words in their original context. The words Jesus used to confront and conquer this first temptation are words that Moses spoke to the Israelites encouraging them to remember the different ways God had both cared for them, and corrected them, over the 40 years they wandered in the wilderness.

When God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt, He did so through a series of unimaginable plagues and indescribable miracles that culminated in the parting of the Red Sea, and when you think of how God manifested His omnipotent power, His unlimited ability to provide for His people, it’s obvious that He could’ve miraculously fed the Israelites from the first day of this journey in the wilderness. He could’ve ensured that His people never felt even a moment of hunger, but He didn’t. Instead, God waited until the sixteenth day of the second month of the journey to provide them with bread from heaven in the morning and meat in the evening (Exodus 16), and in doing so, God allowed His people to go without food, to hunger, to realize they’d come to the end of what they could do to provide for themselves.

By allowing His chosen people to feel hunger, God helped them recognize their weakness. Their aching stomachs humbled them. Their inability to provide for themselves taught them to call out to Him to be their Provider and Sustainer, their Strength for today and Hope for tomorrow. Through a time of hunger and affliction, God brought His people to a place of dependence and humility, and after that time of trial, God caused bread to rain down from

heaven, and the people saw the glory of the Lord in a way they never had before.

God chose to feed His people with manna, this bread from heaven, so that they'd learn to depend on Him, and to trust Him to provide for them every single day. You'll remember that when some of the Israelites tried to go back to providing for themselves by hoarding manna for the next day, the food always spoiled (Exodus 16:20). Manna was a way for God to show the Israelites that His mercies are *new every morning* (Lamentations 3:22-23). Each day, and on every step of their 40 year journey, they would need to depend on God, and Him alone.

When Jesus confronted and conquered that first temptation by saying, "*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God,*" He knew that Moses used those words to remind the people of Israel to depend entirely on God always, for all things, and to never rely on themselves. It is in that context that Jesus spoke those words to the enemy. On that day in the wilderness, our Lord was saying to Satan, I trust My Father completely. It is God who miraculously gives life. It is God who sustains life, and He does so every new morning, in extraordinary ways. I will not fill my stomach with the bread of disobedience, for "*My food,*" said Jesus, "*is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work*" (John 4:34 NIV).

"*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.*" Moses used those words to encourage the people of Israel to depend on God, and Him alone. Jesus used them against Satan. Now, God has given them to us in His written Word as a means to overcome the constant temptation we face - to live by bread alone. We all have our own disordered appetites for those things that fill us up, that give us the greatest satisfaction, but leave our souls starving, aching for something infinitely more nourishing. For the Israelites, the temptation was centered in the desire to provide food for themselves, instead of trusting God to provide for them. In our Gospel reading we saw Satan trying to use that same temptation on our Lord by saying, "*... command that these stones be made bread*" (Matthew 4:3). In other words, don't trust your Father, provide for Yourself.

This is the temptation that we face constantly: Don't trust God, provide for yourself. We succumb to that temptation when we work too many hours; when we hoard our money, our resources, and our time; when a hobby, television, the internet, or any other thing this world offers distracts us to the point where our lives are full of "*the food that perishes,*" instead of being filled with God. Remember, we are the Body of Christ, we are the hands and feet of Jesus, therefore our food, what truly nourishes us, is not to do our own will, but to do the will of Him who sent us, and to finish His work.

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to fast and pray for 40 days, and Lent is our opportunity to follow His perfect example. Over these 40 days may we, by the grace of God, fast. Fast from all of those things that fill us up to the point where there is little room left for the only One who truly nourishes us. Over these 40 days may we, by the grace of God, pray. Pray that we will finally come to the end of what we can do to provide for ourselves, for it is when we come to the end of ourselves, the end of our own abilities, that God rains down bread from heaven and we see the glory of the Lord in way we never have before.