

## THE SEA LION AND SELF DISCIPLINE

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The First Sunday in Lent  
February 21, 2010

From the Gospel of Luke: *Jesus ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. (Luke 4:2)* And from Romans: *The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart. (Romans 10:8)*

The Central Park Zoo is one of New York City's many surprising delights. One Sunday afternoon late last fall my wife and sons and I were there, and we headed straight for our favorite exhibit: the sea lions. The sea lions live in a large pond right in the middle of the zoo. The pond has raised glass walls that allow visitors to see under the water, and rock formations in the center that the sea lions use for climbing, jumping, and sunbathing. The two sea lions themselves are always great fun to watch, but never more so than at feeding time. The appointed hour is 4 o'clock, and as the moment drew near, the sea lions became increasingly excited. They know the rhythm of the zoo, and their hungry stomachs were telling them that dinner should soon be arriving.

Finally, as a clock chimed four, a door across the pavilion opened, and two trainers emerged, each with a bucket of dead fish. The two sea lions sat up straight and looked intently as their salvation drew near. The trainers climbed onto the rocks, tossed a few fish to each sea lion, and then directed them to perform some tricks: stand on one flipper, wave at the watching crowd, leap from the water and catch a fish in mid air. The prize for each trick was a tasty fish, and the sea lions seemed ready and willing to do just about anything for such a great reward. One stunt struck me as most amazing of all. The trainer produced from her bucket a fish that was larger than all the others she'd been giving. This one she didn't throw to the sea lion, but instead handed it over, back fin first, so that it dangled from the sea lion's mouth. Then somehow she directed the sea lion to hold the fish right there. Don't eat it. Wait. Deny yourself. There sat the hungry sea lion for what seemed to be an impossibly long time, with a fish hanging out of its mouth. The fish was near him: on his lips and in his heart. But it did not go down to his stomach. I tell you this simply to stand in awe of the sea lion's amazing self discipline. Perhaps the image will encourage you this Lent!

Today is the First Sunday in Lent. Every year on this day we hear either Matthew, Mark, or Luke describe for us how Jesus went out into the wilderness for a long period of fasting and prayer. As Luke tells us today, *Jesus ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.* It was while out there that Jesus engaged in nothing short of spiritual warfare with the devil. But in order to understand the struggle that ensued, it's important for us to back up just a bit in Luke to see the larger context. Jesus had just come from his baptism in the Jordan River, and there he had become powerfully aware of his identity, of who he was, and what his ministry on earth would be. At his baptism the Spirit had descended upon him, *And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

I believe that Jesus went out into the wilderness to sort through and come to grips with the powerful experience that had burst upon him, and also to pray about what his next steps should be. It was when he was famished, when he was at his most vulnerable, that his conversations with the devil began. The devil's goal was to sow seeds of doubt that Jesus had any special identity at all. The method would be temptation. *The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."* You think you're the Son of

God? Please. I'll bet that right about now you'd be powerless before a nice, soft, freshly baked loaf of bread. With similar temptations to power and miracle the devil sought to undermine identity and ministry of Jesus.

For Jesus, the wilderness temptations were an inner struggle. You need not write the story off because you don't believe in a little red man with horns and a pitchfork. The devil is much too clever to appear in such a guise. Rather, evil slips through the door behind unfulfilled desire and undisciplined cravings. Evil rides into the soul as a virus slips into an unguarded computer – as a parasite attached to something else. We know from Matthew, Mark, and Luke that Jesus resisted all the devil's temptations, and rebuffed his incursions. But how did the three Gospel writers come to know? No one was out there with Jesus to record the play-by-play. So how do we know these things? We know the story because Jesus himself must have spent considerable time with his disciples telling them about the ordeal. Jesus must have regarded his wilderness temptations as a normative experience, and thus as a basic teaching tool to instruct any and all who would come after him. If you want to connect with God, seek the Giver of all good gifts, and not the gifts themselves. If you want true spirituality, set your eyes on the Lord and not on the loot. If you want to follow Jesus, take up your cross and deny yourself. And along the way, you can expect the assault of manifold temptations to choose an easier way.

This brings us back to Lent, and possibly even to the sea lion whom we left with the delectable fish still dangling from his mouth. You see, the more the disciples and the earliest Christians heard the story of Jesus' time of fasting and prayer, the more they tried it. And the more they took up the practice of self denial themselves, the more they made connections between the forty days of Jesus in the wilderness and the forty years that Israel had wandered in the desert. That, too, had been a time of deprivation during which the people had learned to depend not on bread, but on the Lord who provided bread. Well before the end of the first century Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote down the stories as we know them today. Eventually the discipline of fasting and prayer found a natural home in the season of preparation for Easter – Lent. So here we are, welcome to Lent: a time for self-examination and repentance, for prayer, fasting, and self denial, a time for reading and meditating on God's holy Word. It's a time to train our eyes to look through the blessings of this life, and behold the One who blesses. It's time to try it again. G.K. Chesterton was an early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Christian apologist, and author, known for his penetrating quotes. One of them goes like this: "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried." So try we will. What will you do this Lent? Will you do anything specific?

Many people will have a go at self denial. Here is one person, for example, who can't make it to lunchtime without four cups of coffee, and the reason for all the caffeine is because he drank an entire bottle of wine the night before, and the night before that. Here is someone else who for years has subsisted on coffee and doughnuts in the morning, beer and chips in the evening. I once knew a woman who learned to smoke in order to portray a character in a college play. When the play had had its run she put the character down, but never the cigarettes. These are hardly the disciplines of an Olympian, so it's time to deny yourself, eat and drink less, get close to God, sober up, and lose a few pounds. You grit your teeth, plunge into Lent, and perhaps the first thing you hear is Satan's accusing, shaming voice, undermining your identity as a child of God: *You, a child of God? You can't even resist another stiff drink, or this piece of chocolate cake. You couldn't go an hour without your Blackberry if you tried. You're addicted to surfing the internet.* Nevertheless, you forge ahead and deny yourself something you think may be taking up too much room in your life. Perhaps one year you even succeed; you go all the way through Lent without a smoke or a drink. The benefits to your health may be obvious, but are you closer to God? Have you relied on God? No, you've relied on will power, and now you

have the additional virus of pride infecting your spirituality and disconnecting you from God. Beware: pride is the harder demon to exorcise.

More often than the pride of success, however, is the shame of failure. Lent is found difficult and you stop trying. You can't get past the thing you are trying to avoid. A story is told of a man who loved the tasty muffins at the bakery he passed on his way to work. They were nice and soft and freshly baked. One Lent he decided to give them up, and he made his intentions known at the office to keep him honest. Sure enough, halfway into Lent he was spotted one morning in the company parking lot finishing a muffin before he left his car. When a coworker confronted him, the man explained that he'd prayed about whether God really wanted him to continue his Lenten discipline. As a test he decided that when he drove past the bakery, if a parking place was available right in front, it would be a sign from God to break the fast. Sure enough, on the seventh trip around the block, there was the space.

We can laugh ourselves, but beneath the laughing is a nagging sense of failure and lack of control and uncertainty of our identity as children of God. Does a sea lion at the zoo really have more self discipline than I do? Am I really unable to stop doing the things that are slowly killing me? St. Paul put it this way: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand ... Who will rescue me from this body of death (Romans 7)?* Let me tell you something: if Lent brings you to such a place of powerlessness, then it has done its job. If Lent brings you to the place where because of either hollow pride or repeated failure you finally call on the name of the Lord, then it has done its job.

In today's reading from Romans (10:5-13) we've heard St. Paul again: *The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."* Do you know what it means to be saved? I think it has little to do with the smug satisfaction of people who claim the status of true believers, and it has everything to do with being in a living, striving, messy, even argumentative relationship with Jesus. The aspect of Jesus' time in the wilderness that we often overlook is that he went out there "full of the Holy Spirit." You and I also have access to the Spirit of God; indeed, we too can be filled with the Spirit of God, whose indwelling presence connects us with the very life of God. St. Paul again (last time for St. Paul, I promise): *For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. (from Romans 8)*

As a child of God you can call on the name of the Lord when you fail. When you wake in the middle of the night, full of anxiety, worried about problems you cannot solve, you can call on the name of the Lord. When anger threatens to consume you, when disappointment drives you to despair, you can call on the name of the Lord. When temptations persist in the effort to undo you, you can call on the name of the Lord who lives, and whose power working in you can do infinitely more than you can ask for or imagine. When you call on the name of the Lord, you call on him whom God raised from the dead, and who said that we do not live by bread alone. We live, truly and eternally live, by being in relationship with God.

We do not live by bread alone. Do you know what? Sea lions do not live by fish alone – at least not the sea lions at the Central Park Zoo. Up close as we were, what was more amazing to see than the tricks they performed was the obvious bond of affection that the sea lions share with their trainers. Yes, the one sea lion who apparently gave up fish for Lent certainly got that fish and more – much more. The trainer rubbed his back, patted his head, checked his flippers,

gave him eye drops, and best of all, played and laughed with him. The sea lion, by seeking first the giver and not the gift, got the whole bucket of fish, and the love of the trainer too.

And if such love and provision can be true for the sea lions of the zoo, which neither toil nor spin nor gather into barns, imagine how many more good things await those who love the Lord Jesus, and call upon his name.

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