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1 Lent C: Luke 4:1-13  
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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis MD  
*A little big word*

In Jan Karon's novel, *At Home in Mitford*, Father Tim, an Episcopal priest, entertains his new neighbor, Cynthia. Cynthia looks through a book she has found in Tim's study. She quotes a passage: " 'Faith, by its very nature must be tried.' Do you agree?" she asks Tim.

Tim replies, "Absolutely."

Cynthia continues, "I've never been one for physical exercise . . . but what God does with our faith must be something like workouts. [God] sees to it that our faith gets pushed and pulled, stretched and pounded, taken to its limits so its limits can expand."

Tim liked that – taken to its limits so its limits can expand. Yes!

"If [our faith] doesn't get exercised," she says, "it becomes like a weak muscle that fails us when we need it."

[Tim] asks, "Would you agree that we must be willing to thank God for every trial of our faith, no matter how severe, for the greater strength it produces?"

Cynthia says, "I'm perfectly willing to say it, but I'm continually unable to do it."

An honest response.

Lent has been described as a time for exercising the muscles of our faith, of going into a training season of sorts to tend to the parts of our faith

and discipline that have gotten weak or flabby, or to recommit to some healthy spiritual habits so our faith may grow and flourish, so we may actually live the life Jesus came to give us--an abundant life of joy and fulfillment no matter what comes that Jesus came to give us.

Whether you like the thought of Lent as spring training or not, this morning we're going to engage in a little spiritual exercise that leads to abundant life. It is a hard exercise for many of us, even though it involves just a few actual physical muscles. But exercising these muscles, really, is part of Jesus' path to joy. Try it with me. Place the tip of your tongue behind your upper front teeth. Now as you start to push air through your vocal chords, bring your lips into the shape of an "o." Try it again. "N-n-n-o-o." It's a fairly simple exercise. You can do it sitting down or standing up. You can do it pretty much anywhere. But it can be so hard for so many of us to do. Our faces come equipped with everything we need, and yet, it really is a challenge. Who among us has not thought at some time, "I really should have said no"? Or, "why is so hard for me to say no"? "I'm going to have to learn to say no." Ever said it? Well, Lent is a fine time to practice.

Now if you are a parent, you may have actually no problem using this little word a lot. You may be thinking, practice? I am a pro. I heard a reporter on television say the average American two year-old hears the word no as many as 400 times a day. That's a lot of "no!" But other than through repetition with a toddler, how's it going for you? Is it a little harder to say it for yourself?

Our Gospel story hinges on this tiny little word. Jesus says it, and everything is different because he does.

It should come as no surprise that right near the beginning of Luke's account of the good news of Jesus, there is this temptation scene. It may remind us that our whole bible begins with a temptation story right near the beginning of it, right at Genesis chapter 3, if you want to look it up sometime. The story about Adam and Eve, usually called the Temptation or the Fall, wasn't originally interpreted in the way we've come to hear it, as the explanation for how sin came into the world. Originally the story functioned as aetiology, a story to explain how did we get here, why are things the way they are. This story pointed to human conundrums like, why is it that being told there's one thing you can't have, makes you want it more than anything else in the world? Why do people betray and blame the

people closest to them when things go wrong? Why are snakes so weird and creepy? Why is it really, really hard to say no?

It wasn't until the early centuries of the Christian church that the Church Fathers bundled all of these human predicaments together, seeing this story as the introduction of sin into the world and calling it "the Temptation and Fall."

And truth be told, it's not a bad summary to see many of our human problems coming from all the ways we think, "I can say yes," "I can go along with this," "I can handle it," when so many indications are to the contrary; saying, "sure, why not," when we've been explicitly warned, when we know better. When saying no takes fewer facial muscles but is so much harder to do.

The Adam and Eve story takes human freedom seriously and human limits seriously and says if we have a hard time saying no, we come by it honestly, it runs in the family.

But our family tree has some other important members as well. In today's gospel lesson Jesus, God become human for us, faces temptations to say yes to using his gifts for his own benefit alone, to seek his own comfort, prestige, and power at the expense of his calling and purpose. To forgo his baptismal identity as beloved child of God, to sever himself from his connection to God and God's purposes for him. For Jesus to say yes to Satan would be to pretend he hadn't just been forever connected to God and God's purposes. And Jesus says no.

If we take seriously that Jesus was completely human, even as he was completely divine, but if we take his humanity seriously – that he really was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin -- then he said no, not by virtue of some superhuman strength. He said no, not by allowing his divine nature to stand up to all the devil's questions. We know that's not the case because this was the very temptation Jesus was saying no to – he wouldn't call down special favors as the Son of God. If he would face the tempter and triumph, it would be as our brother, drawing only on the same kind of power you and I have as sons and daughters, God's dearly beloved children in baptism.

I wonder if part of the difference between our legendary first ancestors and Jesus was that Jesus trusted the power of community, and when push came to shove, Adam and Eve chose to go it alone. The snake said, “You don’t need God. Did God really say . . . ? What has God done for you lately?” Eve says, “Maybe you’re right, I can handle this. I don’t need God or God’s advice, let alone God’s pretty much straightforward commandment.” Adam doesn’t appear to have thought much at all. And when things really start to fall apart, it was every creature for him- or herself. Adam pointed at Eve, Eve at the snake, the snake just lay there sticking his tongue out. . . don’t look at me. Instead of embracing, they pointed fingers. Instead of paradise, they got separation.

Maybe Jesus had not just the strength, but the courage to say no because he knew he wasn’t in this alone. We think of the temptation of Jesus as a lonely time – he’s out in the desert after all – who is out there with him? But he goes out there led by the Holy Spirit. He goes out there, still damp from the Jordan water of his baptism, his ears still ringing with God’s message to him: “you are my son, my child, my beloved.” He goes out there with the spiritual company of his cousin John who baptized him, with the spiritual company of every other person who had waded through those baptismal waters before him. Jesus may have been out in the desert, but he was most decidedly not alone. Maybe the courage to say no comes from community. Maybe the courage to say no comes from a community that gives us the space to practice saying no. No to things we know will hurt us or others. No to things that will demean us or others. No to things we know are wrong or harmful or unjust. No to things that call us to be other than who we are: beloved children of God, worthy of dignity, bearers of no less than the image of God, each of us with our own purpose from God for the world.

It seems to me that denying ourselves, even giving up something for Lent, has a little bit out of style lately. People scoff, and maybe justifiably so, at the idea of giving up chocolate for Lent (have you tried it?), as if that’s really going to make a difference. Many look down on the idea of giving up alcohol or fasting from television or email or whatever it is that has become routine. After all, if it’s not really a problem for us, why deny ourselves?

But I wonder if to practice saying no now, in training for when things actually are a problem for us, may just be a good enough reason. Practicing saying no to something that takes up more time or energy or

money or appetite than it has to may be a good idea for helping us say no to things that really do compete for God's attention, whether God is calling to us outright, or through our neighbor, through our parish, through our child, our spouse or partner, through some inner voice that is trying to get our attention to call us to be more respectful of ourselves. To practice saying no now, so that we can say yes to some other more worthy things.

Lent reminds us that we have a choice to say no every day. Lent reminds us that we are part of a community that can help us discern and own and practice saying no. So we can say yes, to an abundant life in Christ, a life of resurrection joy.