

I am what is known as directionally challenged. I get easily confused as to what direction I need to be going, I think I parked my car in one place and it is in a completely different place, I just get all turned around very easily. It's difficult, but I make the best of it. That is why I am never going to take up the new sport called "Orienteering." This is an actual sport, which people do for fun, of following directions, taking the most precise compass readings and moving about a mapped-out course with precision, speed and an unerring sense of where you are at all times. For some people it's like a treasure hunt, a mental contest, and a great hike all wrapped into one.

For those of us incapable of determining north from nowhere, and who still depend on landmarks to get us home, nothing sounds more torturous than spending an entire day intentionally trying to follow directions like "proceed for one-quarter mile at eight degrees southwest of the previous checkpoint." For some, orienteering has made a sport out of the science of navigation. But for the directionally disabled, it would be an endless litany of "...go there, don't go there."

Those without an inborn sense of direction have to work to develop the skills and senses necessary to find their way in the world. To guide us about the physical terrain, people have invented a series of ever more sophisticated navigational tools. Sonar readouts have replaced sextants among sailors. Precise computer imaging has made compasses obsolete in a pilot's cockpit. Instead of navigating by the stars, soldiers now use infrared night goggles to find their way. And new cars now come with a Global Positioning Satellite system with hookup capability to ensure that you will never get lost.

All these advancements are giving us more detailed pictures of our world and where we stand in it. They let us know with more and more accuracy when we should "go there" and when the data declares "don't go there." But for those of us with very limited sense of direction, there is another method for determining how we should maneuver in this world and how we should behave for the growth of our souls. There are instructions given to us which help us to find our way in the world, and resist the many temptations and diversions that will continually come to us. These are directions of the heart and soul.

We will not be tempted in as dramatic a way as Jesus was in today's Scripture lesson from Luke. Few of us will be tempted to turn a rock into a loaf of bread, rule all of the kingdoms of the world in a moment in time, or jump off of the roof of the church just to prove who we are.

But we are constantly tempted in other insidious ways by a world which begs us to follow the path of indulgence, ego and self gratification. The voices of the world cry out to us to follow their particular path in order to be impressive, flashy, popular, successful. The world cries out to us: taste me, smell me, buy me, use me, have me and your life will be perfect. Our temptations are most often about feeding our egos, giving into greed, vanity, selfishness. Our temptations have to do with indulging ourselves and placing ourselves at the center of the universe. It is ever so easy to become completely disoriented in such a world. Whether we admit it or not, we are constantly being tempted, engaged in a daily battle between our best selves and our worst selves.

Every week when we pray: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” we are not reciting empty words out of blind habit. We are constantly lured into places we should not go, enticed into decisions we should not make. We are all under pressure to go in a direction which indulges our momentary desires and turns us away from the path of an intentional, deliberate, spiritual life. Time and time again we are tempted to fall short of God’s best intentions for us so that we may give full reign to greed and self-satisfaction. The apostle Paul spoke for us all when he wrote, “I do the very thing I should not do, and do not do the thing I should do!” It can make you utterly dizzy and lost living in a culture so saturated with temptation. “Lead us not into temptation....” And the greatest temptation of them all is to believe that the world revolves around us, to constantly feed our egos and selfish desires.

The good news is that God offers a navigational system to help us maneuver through this life. God offers different priorities and values which help us find our way through the maze of self-indulgence.

That is exactly what Jesus held on to during his temptation in the wilderness. Jesus was hungry, tired, and uncertain as to what the future held for him. It would have been so easy to just give in and hope nobody would be the wiser. But notice how Jesus resists those temptations, not by gritting his teeth and saying, “I will not give in, I will not give in,” just like I try to do when I know there is a chocolate cake in the freezer. Jesus does not use willpower, he trusts in a higher power. He humbles himself and remembers it is not all about him.

When the devil wants him to turn a stone into a loaf of bread, he says, “You don’t live by bread alone.” When the devil offers him all the kingdoms of the world he says, “I will worship God alone and serve God alone.” When the devil asks him to jump off the Temple to prove he is the Son of God he says: “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”

He does not give in to pride, self-indulgence and ego, but keeps his mind

focused upon who he is and what God would have him do.

And interestingly enough, he wins in the end, anyway. Jesus would eventually have all of the things he was offered by the devil in the wilderness. He would always have enough to eat, he would triumph over death, and become much greater than a King ruling all of the Kingdoms of the world. He would be remembered for centuries, with more power than the devil even dreamed of offering him. Funny how delaying gratification often ends up giving you more than you ever wanted in the first place.

Jesus demonstrates that resisting temptation is not about willpower, as much as trusting in a higher power, not as much about who we are as it is about who God is. Resisting temptation is not nearly as hard when you turn your will over to God.

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was asked later in life to explain how God had used him so mightily. Booth gave this explanation: "I will tell you. God has had all there was of me. There have been people with greater brains than I, people with greater opportunities than I, but from the day I got the poor of London on my heart and the vision of what Jesus Christ could do with the poor of London, I made up my mind that God would have all of William Booth there was. And if there's anything of power in the Salvation Army ... it is because God has had all the adoration of my heart, the power of my will, and all the influence of my life." Does God have all of you that there is? Does God have the adoration of your heart, the power of your will, and the influence over your life?

In the first letter to the Corinthians (10:1-13) Paul reminds those early Christians how temptation is as old as humankind. Paul tells them of the temptations of their ancestors in the wilderness, and how many of them gave in. He writes, "Many of them were defeated by temptation during the hard times in the desert, and God was not pleased. The same thing can happen to us, and we must be on our guard so that we do not give in to temptation." And for many of them the temptation was to give up, to quit.

Paul later assures them that "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." I think Paul is onto something here in terms of our approach to temptation. In verse 13 he says: "No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down, never let you be pushed past your limit, will always be there to help you through it."

We will all be forced into the wilderness, be tempted and tested, and those experiences can be humbling and harrowing. More and more I am convinced that

God's will for us is not always to make us happy and content. In the words of Paul Powell: "God is more concerned with your character than your comfort, and God's goal is not to pamper you physically but to perfect you spiritually." I think that maybe that's what the season of Lent is really all about. Allowing God to shape us physically and spiritually. To find things worth living for that are also worth dying for.

The early Methodist movement was characterized by the "class meeting" — an accountability group in which every member had to participate. The meetings began by asking everyone around the circle, "How is it with your soul?" In turn the participants would respond with both the success and the struggle of their spiritual lives and would be prayed for and supported by the community. They would share their temptations and how they had dealt with them.

"How is it with your soul?" It's a great Lenten question. "How is it with your soul?" What needs to be changed, transformed and renewed within you? The next time you are tempted to do something you know is not healthy for you, ask yourself, "How is it with my soul?" Jesus models different behaviors and ways to feed the real spiritual hunger in our lives. He models a way to live deliberately, intentionally and thoughtfully. He demonstrates a way of maneuvering through this earthly life without constantly giving in to every temptation that comes along. It isn't an easy path, but in the end it is the most fulfilling one of all. It leads to abundant and eternal life.

Amen.