Sermon on Lent 1 Year C 2019
(Luke 4:1-13)

Think positive! Lent begins! It sounds counter-intuitive, perhaps, depending on where you find yourself, even annoying. Someone put this on our St. Matthew sign a few years ago and I always think of it on the first Sunday in Lent.

Is it just an eye-catching if unexpected way of putting things or is there something to it?

This past year has been a tough one for Denise and I; one of our kids got divorced, we’ve had some health news and some days we wonder how things are developing in our parishes and thus in our lives; nothing super traumatic, but just enough ambiguous loss to make me annoyed at “think positive” as a slogan.

My proposal, however is that we take some time to consider if there might not be some good news here that if, explored with gentleness towards ourselves and respect for ourselves, might not yield some insights into how Lent might spur spiritual growth in us.

In truth it’s taken the Church a long time to learn that this is what Lent is for! Lent was grasped in great power in the first few centuries but then it degenerated into a way for the Church to browbeat the citizens of Christendom: “you should be doing better; you need to do harsh penance; don’t you know you’re all a bunch a sinners!” Or words to that effect.

It’s power was lost, not because those things are all untrue; at least some of the time for all of us they *are* true!

It’s power was lost because the message was not tied to possibility; not tied to the deeply positive message of the scriptures in the way it might have been.

In reaction most of the Protestant churches threw out Lent making the potential power of Easter so much less; instead of a spirituality tied to the actual patterns of living: that is our eating, our sleeping, our giving, our loving, our temptations; Easter became a one-off event, out of the blue Tada! with no preparation and no follow-up.

Now in a culture of one-offs, where people live from one event to the next, we have the challenging but wonderful opportunity to explore a spirituality actually rooted in daily life!

To root a spirituality in real life we need time; a time to focus the change we long for, a framework of time that is long enough but not too long; long enough to begin to allow our thoughts to change which allows our living to change.

This pattern was established in the scriptures and it has a name: “40”! And it rained forty days and forty nights! And the Israelites were in the desert 40 years. Moses was on the mountain of God forty days and Elijah fasted for 40 days. Those and the story in front of us today are the reasons why Lent has 40 days.

Time to experience the wilderness and the demons that want to drag us down; time enough to summon God’s help so that we can discover the power of engaging and letting go that is the yin and yang of repentance, the change of mind at the heart of growth.

And it is to Jesus and his own 40 day test that we must turn if we’re to understand the paradoxical sentence I began with: “Think positive, Lent begins!”

In his best-selling book *What Makes Your Brain Happy and Why You Should Do the Opposite*, David DeSalvo explains what kind of thinking actually leads to longterm change and it’s not the kind that is regularly served up by all those who advocate just “thinking positively.”

Not all thoughts are created equal; some thoughts have a far greater potential to help us grow and change; some thoughts, however positive sounding, simply reinforce our biases and thought patterns that are, in reality, not positive but negative.

Just one example, if you say something positive, but couch it in all or nothing thinking you’re setting yourself up for failure, so “I’m going to pray one hour every day of Lent or not at all,” which can sound like you’re setting yourself a challenge will inevitably lead to you praying less, possibly not at all, once you fail.”

But saying something like “I’m going to read a good book on prayer during Lent and go for a prayer walk along the dike once a week” is the type of positive yet incremental change that resists all or nothing thinking, that is flexible and can abide failure.

What was it about Jesus’ thinking that was really and truly positive? Is it possible that Jesus’ way of thinking might yet be the way for us to think and thus live positively?

And here’s the foundational thought: “You are my Son the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It’s not in our story; it comes, as you know just as Jesus is baptized, immediately prior to this story.

It is these words that form the necessary background for:

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.”

Jesus is here entering into all these 40’s, these patterns and filling them with new provision, purpose and indeed forging a new path.

Because he’s entertaining the truly liberating positive thought that he is God’s beloved he can be led out into the wilderness not as punishment but as way of exploring God’s new way with the world; his part in helping all of human culture be liberated from “the way things have always been done.”

We’re able to actually think positively when we’re thinking and then acting from a core identity that is given to us by God; embracing this identity helps us begin to confront our shame, our disappointment in ourselves; it is only this that helps us understand what it means to love our neighbour as *ourselves*.

Luke has a different order to the three devilish tests than Matthew. In Luke we get Jesus resisting illegitimate ways of getting his daily bread first and then second resisting the ultimate fulfillment of his mission

The immediate gratification test followed by the “what will define a successful life” test.

Then, interestingly, we have the 3rd test, the seemingly anticlimactic “how will I live life” test. So the pattern in Luke is, daily challenge test, values test, back to daily life test.

However many times I’ve failed these tests I’m coming to understand that if I’m going to grow as a person; if I’m going to “possess and settle into the inheritance God is giving us” to use the language of the first readings, these are the tests that will always present themselves:

“what’s right in front of me today, in other words where’s my provision coming from;” “where am I headed ultimately; in other words what’s my purpose;” but then, always and necessarily crashing back to, “how do I live with the people I’m with today; what path will I take.”

For me, the thought patterns that emerge begin to look like this; they are not rooted all or nothing thinking, and just so, positive:

Provision – God will provide; yes my daily bread, which is less than I think I need but always more than I *actually* need; and there are other “breads,” the bread of learning, fellowship, service, fun that become part of the equation! There will always be provision that truly fills me!

Purpose – I don’t have to follow someone else’s, some generic media-driven, whether Canadian or American or Danish dream of a good life! I don’t have to carve out success on my own terms; I can enter the most fruitful partnership of all; what I adore, what I worship, ascribe worth to will change me!

Path – when I’m tempted to assert myself in an ego-driven way (there are times to be assertive in service of truth, beauty and goodness, for the sake of others and ourselves!); when I’m tempted to put myself forward, I can remember that true significance comes as I treat the person in front of me as an image of Christ; love changes the world.

Diarmond MacCulloch, the greatest historian of Christianity alive today recently wrote a book called *Silence A Christian History* in which he explores the history of prayer in the Church.

At the end of the book MacCulloch, an agnostic but a friend of Christians in his truth telling, urges Christians to take up the practice Jesus exemplified by Jesus in the desert, what he calls “arrow prayers”

Sharp little bits of truth that deflate our egos and orient us to the truth in the face of daily temptations to compromise our baptismal identity.

We will all be led into the desert; we all need to face the tests Jesus passed. The only question is will we avail ourselves of the resources?

What if this year we were to start each day of Lent by saying “With Christ I am beloved of God; I am God’s daughter; God is pleased with me?”

The very breathing in of that prayer is also a breathing out of “I’m useless, nobody loves me; I can’t do it!”

The very breathing in of that prayer is a kind of sending into the wildernesses around us, even in our own souls but now in the power of the Spirit.

Think and pray positive, Lent begins!