

When my husband Steve was a teenager and was beginning to enjoy greater independence, his mother sat him down for a heart-to-heart talk. She told him that she hoped he would make good decisions when he was out with his friends, but that at some point he may find himself in a situation that he knew was wrong or that made him uncomfortable. Steve did not yet have his driver's license, so at that point she advised him, "Remember that you can always call me at any hour to come and take you away from a compromising situation."

Steve must have seriously thought about his mother's offer, for not long afterward, Steve was out with some school friends, who decided to buy sodas from a vending machine. As they lingered by the machine, one of the boys suggested that they could find some extra spending money by vandalizing the machine and taking the coin box. Red flags suddenly appeared in Steve's mind, and as the boys began working on the coke machine, Steve walked to a phone and called his mother. When she arrived, she must have looked like his guardian angel!

Steve's mother loved him and cared enough to prepare him in advance for a potential temptation that might end in life-changing results. The communication between mother and son had become Steve's lifeline, and when the scenario became a reality, he had already made his decision regarding right and wrong. He had already discerned what he would do if and when tested. In this way, Steve's value system was shaped toward greater maturity and integrity by a loving parent.

Jesus had developed well in his childhood, and "grew in wisdom and in divine and human favor." And now as an adult, Jesus, ecstatic with the Holy Spirit's

presence within him, returns from the Jordan and is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. The Greek word, "ecstasy," means "being outside oneself."

Ecstatic experiences refer to very emotional experiences, especially when we are bound to the lives of others in acts of service and goodwill, of giving so generously to one another that the human self is laid aside.

Jesus is to submit to his own 40-day heart-to-heart with his Heavenly Father,

and in the end proving through a series of tests the depth of his integrity.

It is clear that the Holy Spirit has come to Jesus at the point of his baptism and has continued with him into the wilderness. God has a definite plan in mind for his beloved Son. Now it is time for Jesus to be fully launched into his ministry with a final exam. The exam is administered to him alone, in the wilderness, with the devil. Before he leaves the solitude of the wilderness, he will have been tried - and proven - to be beyond temptation, holy and perfect.

Jesus Christ is now fully prepared to live his life with us, as a part of our human story: he identifies with us completely, so that **we may identify our true selves in him.**

Three factors influence Jesus:

First, he is filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit. He is in an ecstatic state, in which his body, heart, and mind are intimately connected with God.

Second, he is alone. He has no other distractions.

Third, he eats nothing at all. Fasting subdues the body's cry for food, increases mental clarity, and humbles his spirit to be completely drawn and devoted to God. It is an act of surrender, a preparation of offering the whole self to God.

Jesus feasts on God's word and prevails.

He first commands Jesus to **prove his status as the Son of God by showing his power** and ability to do anything, specifically, to turn a stone into bread and thus cure his own hunger; but Jesus answers with the wisdom of his Father: "It is written, Man does not live by bread alone." In the solitude as he fasted, Jesus had focused on the spiritual connection with his Father, and was fed.

During the second temptation, the tempter is sly and deceptive as he first claims that the **power to rule all kingdoms** is his to give to Jesus; it is an alluring proposition, to first show Jesus all the power that can be his if he will only . . . turn his back on his Heavenly Father. Jesus answers: "It is written, worship the Lord your God and serve only him." (Deut. 6:13)

As Jesus is tempted for the third time, **he is coaxed to prove his power as the Son of God by calling on God to save him from an intentional brush with death.** Jesus again applies scripture to say that deliverance from evil powers is found in the word of God alone. Jesus answers, "It is said, 'Do not put your God to the test.'"

Power is pretense. Power over others is elusive and easily taken away. As humans in a fast-paced and status-conscious society, we seem to judge ourselves by our own accomplishments and the work we do. Our lives become dominated by our successes. But this creates a façade that can crumble the moment we fail to be our own illusion, and who we have come to believe we are. We begin to fear that we will fail, and that others will see us as we truly are. Our fear of failure

brings us to doubt our worth; and as people who do not feel worthy, we construct walls around ourselves, for we are afraid of being vulnerable and "found out". We want to hold on to the power we think **we** have earned.

Quiet introspection in *God's* word reveals who we truly are, strengthens us in our trials, and sustains us as we live in an influential world. The love of *God* releases to us a sincere vulnerability that frees us from society's expectations and provides a strength of purpose toward others.

The acts of taking what we want are selfish acts. The boys who robbed the vending machine, the temptations laid on Jesus in the wilderness, all promised riches and power in the taking.

Selfish power corrupts. The word of *God* asks us to give, and love, generously and often. The strength to love is so much more powerful, and glorifies Christ who redeemed us with perfect, sacrificial love. Christ showed his vulnerability openly and without shame.

The responses spoken by Jesus to the devil are born of intimacy with the Father. His words do not seek his own glory but give glory to the Father. Jesus finds the courage to follow *God's* will and not his own, for he knows that he can do nothing by himself. And Jesus is raised up as a sign of hope and new life for us all.

In solitude, Jesus grew in the awareness that all the power was given to him;

all the words he spoke came from his Father, and

all the works he did were not really his, but the works of the One who sent him.

Solitude in our culture today is not easily found. Even in small New Mexico towns, and on ranches, we are immersed in the American culture through advanced communication technology. It seems that often we are drowning in it. We find ourselves making an effort to find solitude; to find a restful, silent place where we can collect our thoughts, wait for God's wisdom, truly know ourselves, and discern how God will have us minister to his world.

Jesus walked, full of the Holy Spirit, out of solitude **into the world of his ministry**. After 40 days of solitude he is tried, tested, and found to be true, for he has declared to his tempter that he will:

Trust in God with his whole being, and learn from him.

Worship God, and serve only him.

Never tempt God to prove God's power.

Jesus thus surrenders his whole self to the Father.

When we try to defend our life as our own possession, we forget that our life does not belong to us - our life belongs to God. Our life is a gift, to be received and treasured. It is in this spirit of self-acceptance that God equips us to see our worth as that which we can share in a community of faith.

Creating a lonely place in which we read, reflect, and pray brings us to our real identity. Solitude diminishes the power of our successes and failures and gives us the freedom to show genuine love and compassion for this world, despite all its illusions. It is a form of life-giving surrender, for by surrendering our lives to God and letting go of stifling preoccupation with ourselves, we can understand the needs of others and work toward their successes, not our own.

When I was in 7th grade, a girl with the locker next to mine asked me,
"What are you giving up for Lent?"

At age 12, all I knew was that Catholics ate fish on Fridays, so I said,
"I don't know; What are you giving up?"

She proudly responded, "I'm giving up shoplifting!"

Giving up a self-indulgent sin for 40 days and then resuming it is not
what God expects of us!

God bids us to surrender ourselves and our weaknesses to his power,
and to hope in the free gift of redemption in Jesus!

In Romans 5: 5-8, Paul writes

and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

While we were -- and still are -- sinners, Christ died for us.

This free gift is not to acquit us of wrongdoing and return us to the status of a righteous or good person (v. 7),

it is to reclaim us for a life as generous as the love that created us
and comes to us in Christ Jesus.

This gift gets us outside the barriers in which we currently live.

It is not really until we are reconnected to the life of Christ --that we can begin to understand the awesome dimensions of our common existence as God's **beloved sinners!**

God's intention is to do more than save us from our individual sins.

God's forgiveness is meant to do more than to get us to behave.

**It is meant to lead us into ecstatic lives that are beyond ourselves
and reflected in Jesus Christ.**

Surrender yourself to know God's purpose for you. Learn from him.

Learn of God's goodness and be convinced that

a good life is found not in taking from others but in giving ourselves to them.

Christ has not come to slap our hand every time we have selfish thoughts

or do selfish acts, Christ teaches us that the world will be open to us

and give us the freedom to live in joy as we give ourselves to others.

Our Heavenly Father bids us to examine ourselves during these 40 days of Lent.

I challenge you to turn off your cell phones for 30 minutes a day;

seek out real solitude with your Bible; read God's word, reflect, and pray,

and receive the opportunity to meet God heart-to-heart.

God waits for us with unswerving love, patience, and anticipation,

in the lonely places of our lives. Amen.

HYMN # 710 "We Lift our Voices"

OFFERING