

## Sermon by the Rev. Christopher D. Girata

Luke 4:1-13  
(Lent 5 – Year C)  
21 February 2010

Last Wednesday, we entered into the season of Lent. Lent invites us to take time to remember who we are and who we want to be. In essence, we get to consider the direction of our lives. We are invited to examine ourselves, to discover all that we are and to consider all that we can become. This season invites us to remember what drives our lives.

I recently heard the story of a woman named Alexandra Penney. Alexandra was raised in what she describes as a comfortably middle-class family in Connecticut. Although her childhood was relatively unremarkable, Alexandra lived with fear. Alexandra always felt a very odd fear deep inside of her – a fear of, in her words, “becoming a bag lady.” That fear drove her to begin working at the age of 16 and saving every bit of the money she could. Her fear of becoming a bag lady motivated her to go to an elite college where she succeeded academically and socially. Alexandra graduated from college with honors and, with a desire to be a journalist, took an internship in New York working for *Vogue* magazine. She was very good at what she did and was promoted over and over again within Condé Nast, until finally, she became editor-in-chief of *Self* magazine. Alexandra had worked hard – very hard – and had become a leader in the high-powered, journalistic elite of New York, yet Alexandra still clung to the fear that she might someday lose everything and become a bag lady.

Alexandra’s fear can only be considered *irrational* when you look back at her life, yet her fear, just like our fears, however irrational they may seem, can never be ignored. We all know that fear is real – fear is *very* real. And even though many of us wouldn’t say our great fear is the possibility we may become a bag lady, I believe that Alexandra’s fear is, fundamentally, what everyone fears. The fear of losing what we value most in this world is universal. That fear may take on many forms – money, power, or loved ones, just to name a few, but we naturally fear losing what we value most.

On Ash Wednesday, Rich talked about idols. We were reminded that idols are inherently good things that, over time, we recreate as ultimate things. Alexandra’s fear, like many of our own fears, can be reduced to basic idolatry. Sure, idolatry seems like a terribly dramatic word to apply to natural fears, but make no mistake, deep fears help teach us something about ourselves. Our deepest fears are linked to what we value most. The fear that grips us and won’t let us go, the fear that keeps us up at night or

wakes us early in the morning, the fear that keeps us from doing things we know we should, and being the person we know we can be – that consuming, paralyzing fear helps us to identify when we have taken a good thing and recreated it into an ultimate thing. Deep fear helps us see the idols in our own lives.

In today's gospel lesson, we hear the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Jesus is tempted three times, yet he refuses each temptation. This story is often characterized by focusing on how Jesus kept his eyes on the prize, resisting some truly attractive temptations in order to do the right thing by following God. Yet fundamentally, Jesus is doing more than just resisting things. Jesus is resisting the temptation to follow idols. Jesus has already said yes to God, making God the ultimate focus of his life, and because he's said yes to God, he is able to say no to many other things that might lead him from God. Since Jesus said yes to God, he can say no to a thousand idols.

When we left Alexandra Penney, she had become a high-powered magazine executive. She had been driven to make choices in her life out of fear. She had filled the great void in her heart with a fear that made her a dynamo in the publishing world, but kept her awake at night. No matter how much success Alexandra achieved, she was never able to find peace.

One night, in December 2008, Alexandra was getting ready to host some friends at her home for dinner. She had prepared a cheese soufflé, one of her favorite dishes, and was beginning to set the table when her phone rang. When she answered the phone, the voice on the other end of the line was her best friend's. She said, "Alexandra, I heard Bernie Madoff's been arrested. I hope it's just a rumor. Doesn't he handle all your money?" Indeed, he did. More than a decade earlier, and after receiving glowing recommendations from her well-connected friends on Wall Street, Alexandra had invested all her money – every penny she had saved since she was 16 years old – in Madoff's firm. In an instant, everything was gone. The fear that had gripped Alexandra her whole life – the idol that had controlled every decision – was rearing its ugly head. She had lost everything she had ever hoped to have – and all because she had only ever hoped to have money. The fear that had driven her to such professional success had only been secured with dollars in the bank, and now the money was gone, and with the money went all of her security.<sup>1</sup>

Alexandra's fear had ruled her life, and her fear came true. When we allow fear to rule our lives, when we allow fear to drive us to make one choice after another until that fear makes all our choices, then we, too, have made our fears into idols. When our fears rule our choices, then we are ruled by idols. And

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Penney, *The Bag Lady Papers*, blog on *The Daily Beast* (December 2008-January 2009).

that is the gift of this season of Lent – we are invited to consider how we make choices. We are invited to dig deep and discover what truly motivates us as we make decisions that affect every part of our lives.

The decisions we make grow out of the core of our being, and just like Alexandra, we get to choose how we fill that core. We all know the feeling deep inside us like there's something missing – like there's a hole in our core of our being that we need to fill. We have a choice about how to fill that hole. We can fill that hole with something temporary, something that will fail us – something that is insecure. OR, we can choose to fill that hole with something that is absolutely secure, something that is eternal, and, of course, that eternal hole-filler is Jesus. We can choose to fill the hole in our cores with something and someone who is eternal. And when we've filled that hole with Jesus, with the eternal love and truth of Christ, we will find that we have the strength and courage and endurance to live our lives without being controlled by fear. We will begin to make choices that will become and always be ultimate things because those choices will be God things. When we fill the empty holes of our lives with Christ, we make God our ultimate thing!

Amen.