

C Lent 1
 February 17, 2013
 Psalm 91
 Deuteronomy 26.1-11
 Romans 10:8b-13
 Luke 4.1-13

Two boys were walking home from church and sharing their reflection on the lesson. They had been studying the temptation of Christ in the wilderness. Bobby says to his friend Larry, "Do you believe that stuff about the devil? Do you think there really is a devil?" Larry is silent for a moment, thinking. "Naah," he finally says. He's just like Santa Claus — he's your dad."

The church I served in Colorado offers a Wednesday afternoon ministry for children. On Ash Wednesday every year the Episcopal priest in town teaches the children about the meaning of that day. Ed tells the story of Jesus' temptations and then uses ashes to place the sign of the cross on the foreheads of the children. Like any good teacher, Ed asks the children questions during and after the telling of the story. "Who was it that led Jesus into the wilderness?" Ed asked the kids one Ash Wednesday. The answer from the kids was rapid and enthusiastic: "The devil!" they shouted! Unfortunately enthusiasm in this case does not negate what the text says. In verse 1 of today's reading, we find that it is the Holy Spirit who leads Jesus into the desert. Not only that, but Jesus is "full of the Holy Spirit" following his baptism by John in the Jordan River. Remember the prominent part the Holy Spirit plays in Luke's gospel!

The Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. It is God's plan all along that Jesus undergo a period of praying and fasting before his public ministry begins. You also get the immediate impression that the devil has no chance in his game of temptation. God is, as always, calling the shots.

Temptation. All of us are subject to it, in one form or another. It always carries with it a negative connotation, so it must not be possible to be tempted to do something good. You can only be tempted to do something wrong, at least in the way we normally use the word. The temptations we face are exceedingly numerous and diverse. A temptation that may entrap one person time and again will have absolutely no attraction whatsoever to another person.

Jesus spends forty days in the desert. Those Jewish readers of Luke's gospel probably would have their thoughts drawn to the forty days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai with no food, and the forty days that Elijah spent fleeing from the wrath of Jezebel, also ending up on Mount Sinai. And the forty years that the Israelites spent in the desert, fed there by the bread that God dropped from heaven each morning, and the quail God also provided.

Luke tells us that Jesus eats nothing during those forty days, and he is famished. "If," the devil says to Jesus. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." The devil plays the same game when he tempts Jesus for the third time, in verse 9. "If you are the Son of God." Jesus has just come away from his baptism in the Jordan, where the voice of God is heard saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus knows that he is the Son of God, and he won't be lured by that word, "if."

What is this first temptation all about? At least in part, the devil seems to be playing on Jesus' hunger. His very human need for food. Painted more broadly, the devil is prompting Jesus to give in to his need for those things that provide physical comfort and security.

When that ploy doesn't work, the tempter shows Jesus all the kingdoms and nations and cities of the world. He says to Jesus, "I will give you all of their glory and authority, because they have been given to me. All you have to do is worship me." That last condition makes the proposal unacceptable, of course. But consider what might motivate someone, what might motivate even Jesus, to consider the offer.

If Jesus were given all the glory and authority of all the nations of the earth, think what he could do! All of those social justice issues that are so compelling and so urgent for Luke could be solved almost instantaneously. No longer would widows and orphans starve in the streets of the cities. No longer would the stranger be rejected and cast out. No longer would there be hunger or thirst or loneliness. Hospitals could be built to care for the sick, the lame, the blind, and the deaf. Jesus could instantaneously remake all the social systems of all the nations of the world, and bring about justice and righteousness on the face of the earth.

The devil tries a third time. He takes Jesus to the "pinnacle of the temple" in Jerusalem. He says to Jesus, "if you are the Son of God," (that word "if" again), "then throw yourself down from here." Then the tempter himself quotes scripture, a piece of Psalm 91 that we read earlier: "For it is written," the tempter says, "God will command his angels concerning you, to protect you. On their hands they will bear you up, so you will not dash your foot against a stone."

Even the devil can quote scripture to make his point. Scripture can be abused by anyone at any time. One way to reduce the likelihood that you or I will abuse it, or that we will be misled by others who abuse it, is to spend lots of time reading and studying it. Scripture interprets itself, and we understand that the only way to even approach correct interpretation is to be aware of the whole testimony of scripture. There is substitute for your own reading and study. And beyond that, it is good practice to study scripture with others, so that they may perhaps correct an erroneous interpretation. And it is worthwhile to read other commentators and authorities to see what they think, with the understanding that they also get it wrong sometimes.

Jesus doesn't fall for the last temptation, either. But think for a moment what might have happened if he had. Presumably there were lots of people in the temple grounds and on the streets of Jerusalem. If Jesus had thrown himself off from this high place, and if the angels had come to rescue him, think of all the fame and notoriety that could have been his. No slogging around in the backwater parts of Israel, dealing with people who refuse to see him for who he is. No frustrating encounters with scribes and Pharisees. He could be instantaneously famous, and instantaneously have an audience for his message. What could be better than that?

So what do we do when the temptation we face can, and sometimes does, have truly positive results? What about when we could do some very real and measurable good by giving in? What if we could have power to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and heal the sick and help the poor? What if, by giving in, we could better spread the good news of life in Christ?

We are led by our guide and supreme example, the living Son of God. Jesus says to the devil, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Matthew, in his parallel passage, quotes the rest of this line from Deuteronomy: one lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The devil would give Jesus all power and authority over all the nations of the world, if only Jesus will worship him. Jesus replies, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" (That's also Deuteronomy.) The devil tempts Jesus to throw himself off from the pinnacle of the temple, quoting scripture that the angels will come and save him. Jesus replies, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (Deuteronomy, again.)

There may come times and situations that will offer us the opportunity benefit others in great and wonderful ways. But perhaps there will come with those opportunities the temptation to deny our fundamental allegiance to the God who gives us life. Perhaps one of us might have to bargain away his or her commitment to the commandments we have been given to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Perhaps we might end up putting God to the test, over-committing time and money on a project that doesn't have God's blessing. It's one thing to make an error in judgment on those kinds of projects. It's another thing to put God to the test.

There are times to step forth in faith, and there are times to resist the temptation that we fully know God's will in a particular situation. When Jesus calls, we have no choice but to drop everything and follow. But every call is not from Jesus.

The tempter really has no chance. Jesus knows the plan that his Father has set in motion for the redemption of all mankind. He knows that he is not called to solve all the social ills of the world. His calling is rather to be the lamb who takes away the sins of the world. Being God, he cannot be tempted to test God. Being God, he will not satisfy his physical needs if it means shortchanging his more fundamental spiritual needs.

We are beginning the forty-day season of Lent, a time of self-examination, repentance, and renewal. I encourage you to join me over the next six weeks as we prepare ourselves for the rejection, suffering, and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Our forty days are a mirror of Jesus' forty days in the desert. May we, like him, find our strength in the Holy Spirit as we are tempted by our physical desires, by our yearning for power, and by our desire for recognition.

"One does not live by bread alone. Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him. Do not put the Lord your God to the test."