

First Sunday in Lent March 6 2022

Luke 4:1-13

Temptation is the word of the day.

Jesus is in the wilderness, a place in the Jewish imagination that is filled with trials from God, testing. Like their 40 years in the Wilderness before being led to the Promised Land. The question is, when times are difficult and it is not easy to be faithful, are you?

When you think of being tempted, what do you immediately think of? What are the things you are tempted by?

First to my mind, I am tempted by... a piece of pie or a most unhealthy breakfast biscuit sandwich. By that new book. By the Rikon 10-326 14" bandsaw, or maybe the Laguna 14/12, I can't make up my mind. I'm tempted by the next YouTube video. Can you relate?

Now, while these are the first things that come to my mind, they are not the things Jesus is tempted by. The devil (who is only mentioned once more in Luke after this passage) is tempting Jesus around his identity. While our text reads that the devil says, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread" several translators suggest it would better be read "Since you are the Son of God." The point being that even the devil concedes that this is who Jesus is. The temptations for Jesus lie around how the Son of God should act. As commentator Joel Green frames it, the devil tries to get Jesus to see the title Son

of God as a power to be exercised, not an office to be held- an office that serves as an agent of God and is faithful to God's desires first.

Jesus has been in the wilderness a long time without food. He's hungry. The temptation is to use the power of the Son of God to turn those abundant stones of the wilderness into some nice baguettes, or an asiago focaccia, some really nice bread.

Jesus responds, "Humans shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God." This echoes Deuteronomy 8:3 which reads, "[God] humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Jesus rejects using his power for his own benefit, you can do it- the devil seems to say- so why not end the hunger. Rather, Jesus sees his relationship with God as an office, and suggests that even though he is hungry, Jesus trusts God to provide food in God's own time.

Next is the offer to rule the world. If only Jesus would do obeisance to the devil. The image that comes to mind is from the old Christopher Reeve Superman II movie- "Kneel before Zod". The implication in the offer is that all those who rule earthly kingdoms (in that moment the Roman Empire in particular) do so only through a deal with the devil. Now there is a warning to think about. What the devil offers is a change in identity- to no longer be a Son of God who is promised a kingdom, but one not of this earth- but to be Son of the devil and rule the world now. Once again Jesus rejects the use of his power by his own authority and action and responds by affirming his fidelity to being God's agent.

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, to the Temple- the very place we know Jesus is heading during this time of Lent. “Since you are the Son of God- test out those powers and take a base jump without benefit of a parachute. After all, scripture says God will take care of you.” Now there is another cautionary note, even the devil knows scripture and can make an argument based on it.

Now, we know Jesus is a bit of a risk taker. But, like the first temptation, Jesus trusts God. Basically saying, I don’t have to ram into a tree to believe the airbag will deploy if I need it.

Unlike where our minds tend to go when we hear the word temptation, what Jesus faces is a trial about his identity. His relationship with God. And the devil does this in a very clever way. Commentator Fred Craddock notes that true temptation is not about doing what we can’t do, but about doing what is within our power. The greater the power we have, the greater the temptation. A real temptation, he argues, is not an offer to fall, but to rise.

For Jesus, the temptation to make bread from stones can be seen as not only about his own hunger, but about his ability to feed the hungry of the world. To do good in feeding them. If he does this thing for himself, could he not also do that in his travels and provide the people of Galilee and beyond unlimited bread? An offer not to fall, but to rise!

What kind of good could Jesus do by taking over all the earthly kingdoms? What justice could he bring in the face of the Roman occupation? What bloodshed could he end? He is different than they are, isn’t he? Why not establish his kingdom as an earthly one? An offer not to fall, but to rise!

These temptations are so because Jesus could do these things. Because he (and we) could make an argument that they are good things. True temptation, Craddock argues, beckons us to do that about which much good can be said.

To strike before innocent people are harmed.

To take the levers of power because we/I will exercise them in a more just or uncorrupted way than those other people.

We are good (and sometimes even right) in our rationalizations that can lead us to follow the temptations before us. Things that are within our power to do, but which ultimately move us away from our identity. As beloved children of God, claimed in the waters of baptism. Things that lead us to trust ourselves and our judgements more than following Jesus.

But along with his identity and faith, Jesus had something else working for him. Look at the text again, Jesus was being led by the Holy Spirit in the wilderness. The language used implies that the Holy Spirit is with Jesus throughout the time in the wilderness rather than just leading him to the edge of the wilderness and leaving him there. That the Holy Spirit was leading Jesus in his responses to these temptations from the devil.

If nothing else, from this story along with so many others in scripture, we should reject any idea that being a follower of Jesus exempts us from struggle. From being tested. Tempted. If anything, based again on scripture, it might mean we encounter it even more. Because we want to do good for others. Because we want to lessen suffering. We want to speak for equity for all people regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, of where they live or how they earn a living. And

in our desire to do those things, we are often tempted to follow our own judgement and not God's guidance.

But what we are promised through this story and through our baptisms is that as people of faith we do not face these temptations alone. That we go armed with an identity as child of God, claimed by God in the waters of baptism. That we too are led by the Holy Spirit that came upon us in baptism. That we follow Jesus in this life, who knows what it is to be tempted and to ignore the temptation.

Now, this may not help me much in my decision between the Rikon or the Laguna bandsaw. Or whether to eat that wonderful looking piece of pie. But it will surely help me stop and think long and hard as I am tempted to do what is in my power.

To think long and hard, is this what I want or what God wants? Is the vision of justice and peace I bring the same as God's? How often have we convinced ourselves that we will bring peace through war? I am mindful of a West Wing episode where President Bartlett is angry at the options of a proportional response he has been offered after Syria downs a US military plane on a medical mission. He longs to institute his own form of Pax Romanus- the knowledge that a citizen of Rome could walk the breadth of the empire in peace because if someone harmed them the might of Rome would fall on them like a ton of bricks. His chief of staff Leo says he could do that. It lies within his power, but then talks about why Leo would raise up against him, because it would place the President in opposition to everything a democracy stands for.

What it comes down to is for ourselves, and for our companies, and our church, and town, and nation is that just because we can (remember- temptation is about what lies within our power) doesn't mean we ought. And what decides that?

Not us- but our identity as child of God. Gifted with the same Holy Spirit leading Jesus. Walking behind Jesus, listening to him, doing what he does.

And how do we listen, follow the Spirit's leading? Through prayer- speaking, listening, discerning. Through our time in community with other believers, who will help keep us on the path behind Jesus. Who will warn us when they see us going astray.

As we go forth this week into a world full of temptations- may we trust in our identity and calling as Jesus did. May we go with the comfort that the Holy Spirit leads us, too. May we, when tempted, pray this part of the Lord's Prayer. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."