

February 29, 2004/First Sunday of Lent  
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## Jesus' Temptation and Ours

Psalms 91      *Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.*

Luke 4:1-13      *When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

*Give evil nothing to oppose and it will disappear by itself.      --Tao te Ching*

The season of Lent begins with the story of Jesus' solitude and temptation in the wilderness. He had just been baptized. God had just said to him: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Now God's spirit leads Jesus into the desert so that his relationship with God will be tested.

Already here is a point for our reflection. Jesus' baptism is a lofty moment in his life. Whether at our baptism or at any other moment when we hear God saying to us "You are my child, my beloved," we know who we really are. We know to whom we belong. In such moments we hear deep in our souls the good news of God's unshakable love for us. We know in the core of our being that we belong. Yet in the very next moment, we realize that our lives move on, that we are to live out that knowledge of who we really are within our day-to-day life. And in that daily-ness of life, we encounter testing. We encounter people, events, and moments that will test us. We will need to choose whether or not and how to live out of our relationship with God.

Stories of temptation are part of every religious tradition. The spiritual dimension cannot become integral to our lives without our affirming it from situation to situation. Our relationship with God is not really real until we affirm it again and again when faced with alternatives that would lead us in appealing but illusory directions. It is one thing to think of ourselves as loving God more than anything. It is quite another thing to live that love in the concreteness of life that challenges that relationship of love.

God's love for us—"You are my child, my beloved!"—and our living out of that love as the primary motivation of our lives is not easy. There are challenges, call them temptations, every day, times that present us the opportunity to choose again and again to live by a higher and deeper reality. The story of Jesus' temptation can help us know how to meet our temptations and to stay close to God.

Jesus is led by God's spirit to the desert for testing. There he fasts and prays for forty days. The tempter is there, too, testing him. At the end of the forty days, the tempter presents a challenge. Jesus is very hungry from fasting. So the tempter points to the stones lying around the desert floor: "Turn this stone into bread, if, in fact, you are God's Son." "If you are the Son of God." Here is a temptation for Jesus to feel like he must prove himself as God's child. It is an appeal to his insecurities. It is an attempt to move Jesus from trust in God for all things related to his physical and spiritual life to making material security the foremost project of his life.

Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 8:3 to the effect that we are not made to live by bread alone. The rest of that text goes on to say that it is God's word provides what we most need. This first temptation is not meant to take lightly those who are poor and struggle daily for the barest physical essentials. It is for those of us who have all we need and more, who are tempted every day to forget about the Source of life, who run the risk of living from the dry wells of materialism and personal security instead of from God, the eternal wellspring of life itself. In "Our Covenant One with Another" we have as one of our spiritual disciplines the stewardship of our money, to the point of giving a tithe of what we have. But even this tithe or ten percent is simply a representation of God's claim on our total lives, that everything we are and have is from God. We are only beneficiaries and stewards. To live any other way is to invite spiritual disaster and make us complicit in the damage to people and the creation itself caused by materialism. Jesus says "no." We are meant to live first of all from God, who made the stone and the bread.

The tempter then gives Jesus a view of the whole world, all nations, kingdoms, governments, and structures of power. I will give you all of this, says the tempter, for it is at my disposal. All you have to do is worship me, direct your attention toward me, not God. Here is a temptation to take a shortcut from the difficult journey of discerning and doing God's will to the grasping of power and influence.

"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God," responds Jesus. Worship means not just what we do in a sanctuary or in our personal meditation but in our daily living. Worship is centering our lives in God, not success, achievement, or the gaining of political or personal power. Here is another appeal to any insecurity Jesus might have. It is the temptation to prove ourselves or our faith before others. It is the temptation to have things and people our way, by force if

necessary. Gaining power and influence has strong appeal. But it is also abandoning a life centered in God and God's purposes. Jesus says "no." Worship is meant only for God.

The tempter finally takes Jesus to the Jerusalem temple. Up on the highest pinnacle of the temple, the tempter says to Jesus, "Why don't you jump off? It would be a great stunt. People would be convinced. Besides, you know God will protect you." Here the tempter shows that he can use scripture, too, as he quotes from Psalm 91. The quoting of scripture can mask all kinds of unfaithfulness and encourage all kinds of harm. We've seen it used against women, against people of color, in support of slavery, and currently against people who did not choose their sexual orientation but are being attacked and discriminated against in the halls of political and religious power.

Jesus isn't snowed by the tempter's proof-texting. Scripture itself is not the ultimate word, but the living God to whom scripture points us. Jesus responds that we are simply not to test God's love or care for us. God's love and care are to be the foundation of lives given to doing God's will. God's loving care is to be trusted not tested. The desire to demonstrate to others or have assurances of God's special care for us is still being caught in our egos, our insecurities, our desire to have some kind of status before others.

God's care of us is revealed along the way of our faithfulness to what God calls us to do. We don't know in advance how things will go. We don't undertake what God puts in our hearts looking all the time for proof of God's care or guaranteeing of success. It is only as we give ourselves completely to that calling, without looking for success or proof of God's guidance or care, that we experience along the way, as a gift, that very care, whether we are "successful" or not. Jesus says "no." We simply aren't supposed to put God to a test but to live in faith and trust.

All of these temptations have to do with a central spiritual issue—Jesus' and our complete trust in God. They illustrate the common struggle we have to live out of one center—our love of God that gives life its true perspective and fulfillment. As Jesus contemplates and then dismisses each temptation, he holds fast to his relationship with God.

One last word. It is about the devil, or Satan, or the tempter. We need to think about this for ourselves, where we are on this business of a personified evil. There is an interesting truth in scripture about this. Neither Hebrew nor Christian Scriptures present the devil or Satan as having any real power at all. The very names Satan or the devil mean something like "adversary" or "tempter." Jesus' approach is always to choose the good, to overcome by faithfulness to God not by attacking or getting suckered into a fight and becoming evil ourselves. I was interested that even the renowned William Barclay in his commentary entitles this story: "The Battle with Temptation." What battle? There is no battle. There is a conversation between Jesus and the tempter, in which Jesus simply says "no." There is no dualistic view of reality in the Bible, good versus evil, locked in combat, the outcome never being sure. There is only one reality, one real power, and that is God. The figure of the devil or Satan only has the role of testing people's trust and faith in God. God's relationship with us must be on the basis of our freely choosing that relationship again and again. God has freely and completely chosen us, loved us. But God desires that on our part there be complete freedom and joy as we respond with love and trust. That is where the figure of the devil comes in. The "tempter" is a better choice of words.

Such temptations will always be part of our lives. They are the ways that our lives stay focused on what is really real, on what is best and most meaningful. They are the ways we are given to choose again and again, in the little and big things, to live out of God's love and power, not our own. There are many instances in human history where people choose the ways of violence, greed, self-serving, and to such a degree that much evil is committed. But there is no "devil who makes us do it." And we can never let ourselves fall into demonizing other people. At least, this is the biblical view.

In the story of Jesus' temptation, we see Jesus choosing the way of trusting and loving God above everything else. Through the toughest of challenges, he held onto his relationship with God as the center of his life. As we live in him, the living Christ, we, too, can choose the same path of life in all the challenges and testings of our lives.