

Jesus' Temptation and Ours

Luke 4:1-13 *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.*

Hebrews 2:15-16 *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.*

Luke's story of Jesus' temptation, or testing, comes right after the high point of Jesus' baptism, when God's own voice pronounces him chosen and loved. The very next thing is that Jesus is led—the literal meaning of the word is “driven” or “thrust”—into the desert by the same Spirit of God with which he had been filled at his baptism.

That gives us something to think about! To be filled with God's Spirit, to share Jesus' belovedness as God's children, means that our relationship with God will face challenges and tests. This isn't the fault of an evil world or some evil force. It is God's own doing. The model prayer Jesus gave his disciples says, “Lead us not into temptation.” The assumption is that God may well do just that. So the life of faith is not an escape from challenges; it includes experiences that challenge that very faith. The biblical view and experience is that faith, our relationship with God, is not worth much unless it IS tested. That is how the relationship is strengthened, deepened, and clarified. Christian faith is an orientation of our deepest self, a grounding of our own spirit in God that can sustain us and be deepened through the various challenges we face.

So Jesus is led out into the desert. What will happen? How will he respond? Before we get to that, I want to share a story from Buddhism that kept coming to my mind this week as I reflected on Jesus' temptation. Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, was born an Indian prince. Seeing the suffering in the world, he abandoned his privileged life to become a *bodhisattva*, to devote his life to helping all beings be free of their suffering. For years he tried different methods to achieve the enlightenment necessary to fulfill his *bodhisattva* vow. Finally one day he sat down beneath a tree and was determined not to move until he was free of all illusions, all ignorance, all barriers to compassion and understanding. As he sat, Mara, the satan-type figure in Buddhism, came along and tried everything in the book to distract

Siddhartha from his effort. Mara's final attack was on Siddhartha's basic faith that he could indeed become an enlightened person, a *buddha*. “Who do you think you are to be sitting there with such a high and mighty aspiration? What makes you think you can actually become enlightened?” At this, Siddhartha reached down his hand and touched the earth. In this way, he called upon the earth itself to bear witness to his right to aspire to full understanding and compassion. The earth trembled in response, affirming his right to be liberated. Mara could do no more, so he went away. Siddhartha then continued to sit through the night, and with the rising of the morning star became a *buddha*, one who is fully enlightened, fully liberated. [This story is told in this way by Sharon Salzberg in her book Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience]

I share this story for two reasons. First, it shows that the experience of testing, or temptation, is an important part of every spiritual tradition. There is a figure like satan or the devil in other traditions as well. This figure has no real power, only the power to tempt or test. If we read our own scriptures carefully, we see that satan or the devil is not the embodiment of positive evil. Even the words for “satan” or “devil” are derived from a root word that means testing or tempting. God is not locked in combat with a counterpart force. Even in the Revelation to John, so misused by “evangelical” Christianity, the figure of satan, pictured as a dragon, has no real power. He causes a lot of problems and stirs up a lot of trouble. But God is always fully in charge. There is never any question of that. So in the story of Jesus' temptation, the devil has only the power to challenge or test Jesus' relationship with God. There is no battle between Jesus and the devil. Jesus “just says no.”

The second thing about the story of the Buddha is that it offers a powerful image for our spiritual lives--Siddhartha in the midst of Mara's assault on his confidence and faith placing his hand on the earth. It is the image of touching the ground of reality itself, for us, God. It is the image of stabilizing ourselves when we are in the midst of confusion or fear or doubt or whatever assaults on our faith might come along. It is stabilizing ourselves by touching what is most real, just as Jesus does. We touch our relationship with God.

The devil challenges Jesus' trust in his relationship with God. “IF you are God's beloved Son....” There is nothing more unsettling to us than a challenge to our sense of self. When someone pushes the button of our insecurity about ourselves, we are undone. The first and third temptations in the story start this way—“IF you are God's Son,

then turn this stone into bread to end your hunger, throw yourself off this temple and make God prove the care promised to you.” If you are who you say or think you are, then prove it! It is a direct hit on our insecurities. Our response is to try and prove ourselves, to prove something, even to prove God.

This is often the source of our anger, fear, and violence. Fighting and wars are not evidence of our strength, but expressions of our insecurities and weaknesses. A truly great nation does not have to prove itself or force its will on others. A great nation is not defined by its military power. It is known by the way it cares for people, meets the needs of those most vulnerable, and works peaceably and cooperatively with other nations for the good of all. It is true with nations and with persons: those who have to strut their stuff, so to speak, are the ones who are least secure in who they are. I know it is true with me. When I am angry or frustrated with people, when I want to lash out and defend myself—that is when I am feeling least secure. So I have learned to look inside. What is it that is making me afraid? What is it that has gotten me out of touch with my sense of peace and being grounded? This is reaching out my hand and touching the earth, touching what for me is most real—God and my relationship with God.

The second temptation in the story is the offer of the power and authority represented by the kingdoms of the world. A quick victory. A seizing of the power structures. Wouldn't any sensible messiah go for that in a heartbeat? But there is a subtle catch. It can all be yours, says the tempter, because it has been given over to me. The world of kingdoms, the world of politics is in the hands of the tempter. To go after its glory and authority is to fall into very murky waters! There is one more catch: to gain this, you have to worship me, says the devil. Now, I don't think it is easy to sort this out very clearly. Does this mean that the world of politics itself is separate from God? Does it mean we should not engage in efforts to make things better through political channels? No, I don't think that is what is meant. But it does warn that seeking to gain political power and authority, even for religious ends, means abandoning our relationship with God as the primary foundation of our lives.

Here we must remember Jesus' words to Pilate at the time of his trial: My kingdom is not from this world. When Jesus' followers try to control people and systems and political power structures, they have ventured onto very thin ice. This is why there certainly are political implications in Jesus' life and teachings, in his death and resurrection. But on the basis of the gospels themselves, there is no ground for seeing

Jesus as presenting a political agenda or launching a political movement. This will always be an important issue for us as Christians, one that can never and should never be finally settled. It is a matter of struggle. The main thing is to see that the gaining of worldly power and authority is not the aim of the Christian life, and to be mindful of anything that we allow to become the object of our worship other than God.

This aspect of the temptation story, that is, our touching of our relationship with God especially in times of struggle or testing, tells us how important is what we call the inward journey. It is the practice of prayer, meditation, study, self-examination, and growing in self-understanding. It all comes down to the practices we adopt in our lives for touching our relationship with God. When we feel ourselves confused, fearful, anxious, or simply not sure which way to go, we sit, breathe, quiet our hearts and minds, and practice inward silence. I have seen this happen so many times with people and experience it more and more in my own life. When we make time for a spiritual retreat, it happens, whether our retreat is for an hour, a few hours, or a few days. In the quietness and away from the immediacy of stresses, we begin to touch something deep inside ourselves, something solid and real. It is, as we come to understand, our own relationship with God.

We can do this each day, when we make a time for our inward journey, time to sit, to practice quietness, to read meditatively, and to open our hearts and minds in prayer. When we are doing this, we grow in our ability to say no to those things that vie for our loyalties, especially our ultimate loyalties. We become increasingly able to see what is of true value and what is superficial. Then we are able to give ourselves more and more to that which is most real and lasting, God and our relationship with God.

I think that the story of Jesus' temptation understood in this way helps us make sense of that verse in the Letter to the Hebrews: *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.* Jesus' facing of his temptations helps us in the facing of ours. His being “without sin” means that he was able to face those challenges keeping his relationship with God close to him as the most important thing in his life. He shows us how it is done. As we follow him, we find in ourselves the same God-created ability to touch our relationship with God and live our lives out of that relationship.