

February 21, 2010/First Sunday in Lent/David L. Edwards

### 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.*

The story of Jesus' temptation follows immediately the high point of Jesus' baptism. Right away Jesus is led—the literal meaning of the word is “driven” or “thrust”—into the desert by the same Spirit of God that blessed and filled him at his baptism. Things move from the mountaintop heights to the desert depths. However, the desert for Israel always had special spiritual meaning. It was not a God-forsaken place, but a place where one's relationship with God could be clarified and strengthened.

That gives us something to think about. Being filled with God's Spirit, sharing Jesus' belovedness as God's children, means that our relationship with God will be challenged and tested. The desert is important for us, too. The testing of faith is not because the world is evil or there is a demonic force out to get us. It is God's own doing. It is a part of life. The life of faith is not an escape from challenges; it includes challenges. The biblical view and our own experience teach us that our relationship with God is strengthened, deepened, made more real through testing. This is because the meaning of testing in scripture is not like a final exam which one passes or fails based on performance. It is the refining process of a precious metal as it is purified and shaped.

Before we get to Jesus' story, I want to share a story from Buddhism that comes to my mind whenever I reflect on the story of 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*, one whose life is devoted to helping all beings be free of suffering. For years he tried different methods to achieve the enlightenment necessary to fulfill his vow. Finally, one day he sat down beneath a tree and was determined not to get up until he was free of all illusions, ignorance, and 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 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 continued to sit through the night, and, as the morning star rose, he became a *buddha*, a fully enlightened and liberated human being. [The 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. The devil can't "make" you do anything. If we read our own scriptures carefully, we see that satan is not the embodiment of positive evil. Even the word for “satan” is derived from a word that means testing or tempting. God is not locked in combat with a force of equal but evil power. Even in the Revelation to John, so misread by self-named “evangelical” Christianity, the figure of satan, pictured as a dragon, has no real power. He stirs up a lot of trouble and makes a mess of things, but John is very clear that God is always ultimately in charge. There is never any question of that. So in the story of Jesus' temptation, the devil only has 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 as followers of Jesus--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. It is the image of stabilizing ourselves when we are in the midst of confusion or fear or doubt or whatever assaults us. We can stabilize ourselves by touching what is most real, just as Jesus does. We touch our relationship with God. And that is what the practice of an inward journey is all about.

The devil first challenges Jesus' sense of identity. “IF you are God's beloved Son...” There is nothing more unsettling than a challenge to our sense of self. When someone pushes the button of our insecurity about

ourselves, we come undone. The first and third temptations in the story start this way. If you are who you say or think you are, then prove it! You are hungry, so why not turn this stone into bread and eat. God has promised to protect you, so why don't you throw yourself off this roof and see if it's true. That is, IF you are really God's chosen one. You see, it is not really about Jesus' power to perform miracles or proving God's care. It is about defending some self identity we have. It is about our egos. Food is important for human life. God's care of us is important. Jesus' response goes deeper, however. The most important thing is our relationship with God, the knowledge that our lives are grounded, not first of all in our material lives or our self identities, but in God. Such temptations are a direct hit on our insecurities. Our response is to try and prove ourselves, or to prove God. We get suckered in. We take the bait. But Jesus shows that we don't have to defend ourselves and our relationship with God. We don't have to prove anything.

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. It's strength is not defined by its military power, but 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 also true 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, 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 making me afraid? What 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—my relationship with God.

The second temptation is the offer of the power, authority, and wealth represented by the kingdoms of the world. A quick victory. Seizing the power structures. Controlling the resources. 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 and wealth is in the hands of the tempter. To go after its glory and authority is to wade into very murky waters. Furthermore, to gain this, you have to worship me, says the devil. Does this mean that the world of politics 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 "spiritual" ends, means risking 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 are on very thin ice. 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. The main thing is to see that the wielding of power, and authority, or the acquisition of wealth, 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.

The temptation story is about touching our relationship with God in times of struggle or testing. It reminds us of the importance of what we call the inward journey--the practice of prayer, meditation, study, self-examination, and growing in self-understanding. It is about the importance of the practices we work with 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 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 the inward journey, it happens. Whether it is a few minutes or an hour, when we practice going back to our relationship with God and our true selves, we touch something solid and real. It is our own relationship with God.

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, and what we are called to be and do out of that relationship.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the writer says this: *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.