

“GIVING UP: I - TEMPTATION”
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February 17, 2013

Luke 4:1-13

The other day, when I sat down to start to work on this sermon, I thought to myself, “Hmmm . . . every single person in the church could write this one . . .” Why? Because it’s about temptation. And there isn’t a person here who isn’t an expert on that topic.

I read about a little boy this week who wrestled with it. He was in elementary school, and as it happened, he sat right across from the smartest girl in his class. When they took tests, he was really tempted to cheat off of her. And one day, alas, he yielded to the temptation. After the teacher looked at the completed test papers, she suspected he had cheated, and called both of the students to stay after class to talk with her. When they were alone, she turned to the little boy and said, “I think you cheated on your test.” The boy asked why. The teacher said, “Well, you both got the highest score.” “Oh, that’s probably just a coincidence,” he replied. “Maybe,” said the teacher, “but you both got one wrong.” “Oh, probably a coincidence again,” he said - never skipping a beat. “Maybe,” the teacher said again, “but it’s the same one.” “Coincidence,” the boy insisted. “Maybe,” the teacher said a third time, “but on her paper she wrote, ‘I don’t know’ and on your’s, you wrote, ‘I don’t either.’”

Oh, temptation, it’s everywhere, all the time, for all of us. It’s been around since time began - we see it vividly in the opening pages of the Bible with the story of Adam and Eve. But this morning’s Gospel lesson’s story of temptation is perhaps a bit surprising, because the one being tempted is Jesus.

And perhaps what’s even more surprising, is when it happens. Jesus has just experienced one of the spiritual highs of his life. He has just been baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. He saw the dove descend, and He heard the voice of His Father telling the world that He was well pleased with Him. It was a powerful moment when He knew who He was, and what He was called to do. It was one of those high, holy, mountaintop moments I was talking about last week.

But, like I said last week, those moments don’t last forever, and aren’t meant to. They’re meant to carry you through the rest of life.

And the rest of life for Jesus, at that moment following His baptism in the Jordan, began with 40 days in the wilderness. Forty days of fasting, praying,

walking, and wrestling with the devil. Yes, even for Jesus, temptation comes a callin'.

Let me set the stage for you. As I said, after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, He left there and traveled into the wilderness, which, by all accounts, was about five miles west of there. The wilderness there is not some wild place filled with trees and plants - no, the wilderness there is barren, rocky, desert. Dry, dusty, dangerous and barren.

Jesus likely walked during the day and stayed in caves at night. For forty days He did that, fasting, praying and spending time in solitude with God. So you can imagine the toll it took on him. Forty days of fasting in this dry, arid land would have left him weak and vulnerable.

And that's when the devil showed up. (That's when the devil always shows up - when we're tired, and weak, and worn - when we'll agree to anything.)

Anyway, the devil shows up and starts to mess with Jesus. "Okay Jesus, show your stuff. I know you're starving. So if you are the Son of God, show me. Turn this stone into bread. You can end your suffering. Just turn this stone into bread."

Oh, how tempting that must have been. Jesus was starving, and we know from other places in scripture, like when He turned water into wine, Jesus could have done it. But He didn't.

Well, the old devil wasn't about to give up. On to Plan B. He led Jesus up and showed him a vision of the whole world. "This can all be your's Jesus. All you have to do is worship me. It can be all your's. Think of it, the power, the wealth, the vastness of it all. It can all be your's, just say the word." But He didn't.

Undaunted, the devil went to Plan C. He took Jesus to Jerusalem, placed Him up on the pinnacle of the temple, and challenged Him. Only this time, it was like a double challenge. First, he challenged Jesus to have the courage to jump off of the pinnacle, and then He challenged Him to prove that God would save Him. And, for a third time, Jesus wouldn't do it.

Think about the things with which the devil was tempting Jesus - feeding the physical hunger of his body; wealth, success and worldly power; and the opportunity to make God prove Himself - all powerful temptations, and yet, every time, Jesus said no.

And it is how He said it, that bears looking into. Because how Jesus handled temptation, provides us with a great picture of how we can do it as well.

First, did you notice that, every single time, Jesus answered the devil's tempting with scripture - every single time. When offered food, Jesus responded, "One does not live by bread alone." When offered all the kingdoms of the world, He responded, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and only Him.'" And when the devil tempted Jesus to put God to the test, Jesus said, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Now, I want to say two things about using scripture to fight temptation. First, the reason that we encourage children and everyone, in fact, to memorize scripture is for just such times as these Jesus faced. So that, when temptation shows up, you have a weapon to fight it.

I talked to a young person just last week who was talking to me about the 23rd Psalm. When I started to recite it to him, he stopped me and told me that his favorite part of that psalm was not the beginning - "The Lord is my shepherd," but the line that goes, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." You see, he gets it. Sometimes the valley of the shadow of death is facing temptation, and he seems to understand that, knowing that line, having it right there on his lips when he needs it the most, will help him face whatever comes.

Jesus knew it too. Scripture was on his heart, and when temptation came his way, it was right there on his lips, and it empowered Him to say no to the devil.

So that's one thing I would encourage all of us to continue to do - is memorize scripture, because it will be there when we need it most, and serve to remind us that we're not in the fight alone.

The second thing I want to say about Jesus using scripture to fight the devil is that I think it meant more than just the words He was saying - it also spoke to His trust in God. One writer put it this way: "It's not so much that Jesus quotes scripture to deflect temptation as it is that Jesus finds in scripture the words to give voice to his trust. Because at the heart of each reply is Jesus' absolute trust in - and dependence on - God, for his identity and future." (On-line, workingpreacher.org, "Trust and Temptation," Rev. David Lose)

He's right. Every scripture that Jesus quoted spoke to His trust in God. That writer continues by saying: "There is a crucial link between trust and temptation. To the degree that we trust God for our daily needs, for a sense of purpose, for our identity as a child of God, the temptations of the world have, frankly, little appeal. But to the degree that we allow our natural insecurity to lead us to mistrust God, we are open to the possibility, appeal, and temptation of the proposition that it is all up to us, that God is not able to provide and so we'd

better take matters into our own hands.” (Ibid)

It is, in the end, a matter of trusting God, when it comes to facing temptation. Do we trust Him to supply our needs, do we trust Him to care for us, do we trust Him to guide us all our days? If we do, we can face temptation with the strength of an army.

So, Jesus trusted completely in God, and showed that trust through His use of scripture. But the other thing He did was remain obedient to God. He knew what He should do. He knew what God was calling him to do, just like we know, don't we, what we really should do, when we're tempted. We know, deep down, what is right and what is wrong, and yet, sometimes we choose the path of disobedience.

Not Jesus. Pastor Brian Erickson, in a sermon on this passage, wrote: “The only vaccine to temptation is obedience. Jesus' escape from the tempter is not a matter of weighing pro's and con's and making the best decision; it is a willful choice to submit to God.” (On-line, “Dress Rehearsal in the Desert,” Rev. Brian Erickson)

That's how Jesus fought the devil - with trust in God as shown in His use of the scriptures, and with obedience to His will. And as difficult as this encounter was, Jesus left His time in the wilderness stronger than when He entered it. That experience, and how He handled it, would serve Him well in the days of His ministry that lay ahead. For, knowing that He had given the devil a run for his money and come out of it unscathed, helped Him handle the horrible things that were yet to come in his brief time on this earth.

Now, what does this mean for you and me? Well, if you've spent any time at all this week pondering what you would give up or take on for Lent, you've no doubt spent time thinking about temptation. For isn't, for instance, giving up chocolate or ice cream, dealing with the temptation to eat in an unhealthy way? And isn't, giving up cursing or gossiping, dealing with the temptation to speak in a bad way? And isn't, giving up shopping, dealing with the temptation to have more than we need? You fill in the blank. Isn't what you're giving up for Lent, or taking on for Lent, about temptation and fighting it?

We would do well, during Lent, and always, to look to Jesus when we face temptation. Look to Him and how He fought the devil. Lean on scripture, put your whole trust in God, and do what you know in your heart He wants you to do.

I don't know about you, but it gives me great comfort to know that, as I fight temptation, I have One by my side, who has fought it too. He knows everything we're going through, He's been there, done that, and come out on the other side, and He wants to do that with us and for us as well.

So I want to finish today with a short story of the reality of the devil and temptation in our world today. It's a story some of you may have heard before, but I think it bears repeating, because the devil is a wily character, and unless we're careful, we'll succumb to his charms.

This is the story of a businessman who was on vacation and went for a walk down by the pier of a coastal fishing village. He saw a small boat with just one fisherman on it pulling up to the dock, so he went over to talk to him. Inside the boat were several large yellowfin tuna. He complimented the fisherman on his catch and asked him how long it took to catch them.

"Only a little while," the fisherman said.

"Oh, well, why didn't you stay out longer and catch more fish?" the businessman asked.

"I have enough to support my family's needs."

"But what do you do with the rest of your time?"

"Oh, I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife, and stroll into the village each night where I sip wine and play guitar with my friends. I have a full and busy life."

"Hmmm," said the businessman. "You know, I have an MBA from Harvard, and I'll bet I could help you. You know that if you spent more time fishing you could catch more fish and then with the proceeds you could buy a bigger boat. Then you could catch even more fish, and buy even more boats. Pretty soon you could have a whole fleet of boats. Then you could cut out the middleman and sell directly to the processor, and eventually you could buy your own cannery. That way you could control it all - the product, the processing, and the distribution. You could leave this little village and move to Mexico City, and then expand to Los Angeles, and New York. You could have a great empire."

"Well, how long would all that take?" the fisherman asked.

"Oh, probably fifteen to twenty years."

"Then what?"

"Well, that's the best part," the businessman replied. "When the time is right, you make a public offering of your company stock and you would become very rich, probably a multi-millionaire."

“Then what?” the fisherman asked.

“Oh well, then, you could retire and move to a little coastal village where you could sleep late, fish a little, play with your grandkids, take a siesta with your wife, and stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play guitar with your friends.”

Oh, temptation, my friends, it’s all around us. It’s a fact of life. And the fact is that we have to deal with it. But how we deal with it is our choice.

May you and I face temptation, looking to Jesus, for the example He has shown us, and for His presence and power to help us make the right choices. May it be so.

Amen.