

Luke 4:1-13 The Temptations
March 10, 2019

Our Lenten Sundays begin with the Temptations of Christ, which in Luke's gospel, as in Matthew's, is a somewhat involved contest with the devil.

Jesus has matured into adulthood. Other than his likely vocation as a woodworker, not much known about his previous life. It is important to say that he was Jewish, and is presented by genealogy as being connected to Israel's royal family, and also as a new Moses and Elijah, associating him with the Law and the Prophets, thus all the major lines of thought in Israel's faith.

He was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, one of the ways he is connected to the prophetic tradition, and located in the time of the Caesars of Rome. And in the text we have read today, he is at the beginning of a journey that will complete itself in his death, and his Easter.

He began it by going away privately for awhile, and in his time away fasted for 40 days and nights. It was a time of prayer. It was a time of testing or temptation, both words can be used interchangeably. There were three temptations mentioned, and they may be said to represent three categories of temptation and so have a broad reach into our lives.

Bread

The first test is about the bread and it was encountered because he hadn't eaten and thus was hungry. "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread," the devil said. In other words Jesus was tempted to believe that life consists in the meeting of our most basic needs, for food, and it may be expanded to include the human need for clothing and shelter and sex, for pleasure and for relationship; and he was being asked to obsess about such things and see them as the highest good, and at a time of vulnerability.

His answer is that there is more to life than all that, more to life than food, clothing, shelter, sex, money and things, and even friends and family. He set forth the conviction that to excessively focus on these things will leave a person unsatisfied, empty. "Human beings do not live on bread alone."

We say it over and over. I have heard it all my life, but we are tempted nonetheless. It is hard not to be focused in some way on these basic needs because we deal with them everyday and are always threatened with their lack. We are tempted to obsess over them even though countless witnesses testify to the failure of the life given to this temptation to result in fulfillment. "If you seek your life," Jesus said, "you *will* lose it."

The World

The next temptation happened when the Devil went out and offered Jesus the world. Here we move into a category of testing that affirms that there is more to life than food and clothing. There is power and wealth.

I am not sure how realistic it was for a poor Galilean Jew to aspire or maybe even be tempted by wealth and power in the world of Tiberius and Herod; but I am also not sure how realistic it is for any one of us to believe we each have the chance to be president or win the lottery, but I am sure that at some level we are all attracted by the idea of these things. Those who do find themselves in some sort of proximity to power, fortune, usually find it difficult not to wander off in that direction.

In a way, to believe in the value of such power *is* what it means to “worship the devil.” One should be warned even against the lesser more subtle ways of satisfying this urge to be in control. “Worship the Lord your God and serve God only,” is the reply, which comes from the 91st psalm and is a variation on the first commandment.

The example we are offered here and the instruction given by Jesus is that obsessing over our basic needs or chasing after the world neither one is the meaning of life. They are subtle temptations and not easily overcome.

The Question of God

The final crisis is interesting because it involves the idea that God exists to serve us instead of the other way around, the idea that the source of life and meaning is a test we make of God rather than a test God makes of us.

Every time I hear people speak of their unbelief on the grounds that believers are hypocrites, or because they point in one way or another to the failure of the Christian church to transform the world; or when I hear people complain that they choose not to believe in God because of the presence of pain and suffering and evil in the world and they just can't reconcile the idea of a *good* God making *this* world; I am aware that there is a *strong* temptation to *put God* to the test, when the reality is that God has put *us* to the test, and it is *we that have failed*.

One must come to a way of understanding of life with all its demands, all of its contradictions, all its beauty and ugliness, pleasure and pain, with an unrelenting faith, and that is what Jesus has exhibited here. Read the psalms and see in them the depth of pain and sometimes even doubt, and judge for yourself whether they are given in faith or unbelief, and I believe you will conclude that they are faithful, even though they sometimes ask bold questions. Faith asks God questions, but it never puts God to the *test*. “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Faith is like a child asking, “why?” The question is a curiosity not a rebellion. The child asks because they really want to know and believe the parent has the answer. In the interaction between the loving parent and the inquisitive child something happens that we call relationship. In that interaction, faith is deepened and love is strengthened. The danger lies when the faith and the love are removed and the question becomes a test.

The combined force of these three temptations, is that in submitting to them we take the concern over our daily well-being and over our ambition to be in control and transform them into a rebellion against the God who has given us life.

In order to avoid this snare we deny ourselves (that is the way Jesus puts it in another place) and that self-denial at least begins in a way that seems like a lonesome wilderness, like we are the only ones who have ever faced these questions. In actuality, everyone faces them. The promise of the gospel is that the passing of these tests lead to a life of joy and peace, while failure just leads to trouble, stress, and anxiety.

Lent

Lent begins, almost perfectly this year it will accompany the coming of spring. It began on a bitterly cold winter’s day and has continued on this day when the clocks are changed making the daylight longer, and will end in late April with warm sunshine and flowers and leaves budding out on the trees.

Like Jesus we face the same temptations; to obsess over the meeting of our basic needs, to chase the world, and to hold ourselves back from a relationship with God like a test.

Like Jesus, through faith, and intentional disciplines like prayer and dare I say, fasting, and with grace, we will face down the mistaken understandings of life and with divine help, overcome them until a last we find peace in our inmost being.

That is what the season means, it is meant to be more than a season, but a life. To be sure, then end is our salvation, but in the mean time is our testing, of service, learning to live in the redeemed world.

Amen.

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