

It's still about a month shy of two years since I began preaching in this place every Sunday as your newly called pastor. Before that Palm Sunday in 2005, I'd had two periods of about three months each when I'd been a preacher on a regular basis, one just before I came here and one 13 years previous. Between those two stints as an interim pastor and before the first one, my preaching experience consisted of a handful of pulpit supply opportunities ranging from dying inner-city churches to vibrant suburban churches to "pillar-of-the-community" rural churches. All of that to say that I'm not sure that I've done enough preaching yet for me or anyone else to be able to characterize my preaching as falling into a particular emphasis or having an overarching theme. If I were to examine my preaching to date with the eye of the actor I used to be and attempt to do a textual analysis of it, I'm not sure I could find what theatre practitioners call the "spine" or "through-line" of my messages. There's simply not enough material yet. But I did have occasion to browse through my work here a couple of weeks ago as I looked for a sermon to submit to a contest I'd been encouraged to enter and it seemed to me that over the last two years I've served up a pretty substantial helping of the Social Gospel. Many of my sermons, in other words, have been concerned with the impact that we, as the Body of Christ in this place, can have on our neighborhood, our region and our culture.

I don't see that as a negative and I hope you don't either. But as we enter the traditional Christian season of Lent, it's time for me to shift gears. Lent is an introspective time in the life of the Church, an annual opportunity for us as Christians to look at our own lives and to consider how we might need to change to bring our lives closer to the life of Jesus. The Lenten season begins with Ash Wednesday and in Ash Wednesday observances now and in the past, Christians have been called to humility and repentance, to reflect on the weaknesses we have not overcome, the times we have failed to live up to our mandate to love God and our neighbor, the temptations to which we have succumbed. Temptations come to the fore again today in the first Sunday of Lent, which is always marked by the reading of the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. For centuries, believers have observed forty days of fasting during Lent in commemoration and solidarity with Christ's forty day fast. (Incidentally, if you look at the calendar, you'll see that there are more than forty days between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Sundays are not included in the days of fasting because, as we sang last week, "Every Sunday is Easter Sunday" and a celebration of the Lord's resurrection). During Lent, we are asked to join Jesus on the journey inward. As he reflected on his baptism, on the words of God which identified him as the Beloved, and on his upcoming ministry, so are we invited to consider where we stand in light of the promises we made at baptism, on whether we have claimed the full status of beloved ones of God, and on how we have fared in acting as members of the effective, ministering Body of Christ.

The story of Jesus' temptation in the desert is likely a familiar one to most of us. There may be, however, some elements of the story that keep it from being real for us, that prevent us from taking it seriously as part of our story as well as Christ's. There is the desert setting, for example. It may be different for many of you but I can tell you that I've never spent any time to speak of in a desert or a wilderness. The closest I've come has been on my drives from the Midwest to the West Coast, crossing either the deserts of the Southwest or the high plains, depending on my route. Even there, of course, I was on interstate highway, never going more than a few minutes without seeing another occupied vehicle or less than an hour without seeing a human habitation. The real desert, unpopulated and dangerous, is rare in our experience. But all

of us have surely known the reality of spiritual wilderness – those places where our spiritual lives are in danger, either through lack of sustenance or through outright attack. Or they may be the places where we are most vulnerable to temptations. We might spend far more than forty days in such places; they may be our schools, our offices, even our homes. Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit for a time of testing. Where are we led in our lives that we experience testing? It's worth remembering, too, that Jesus was alone when he was tempted. One of my favorite novels is Joseph Conrad's great short novel, Heart of Darkness. Part of the message of that book is that human beings are capable of dreadful things when removed from the constraints of their normal society. The desert of testing may be anyplace we find ourselves removed from what we think are the limits of our normal lives.

Then there's the form of the story itself: the hero set three tests by the wicked enemy, only to emerge triumphant at the end. That may seem a little too much like a fairy tale for some of us to take seriously and to enter into for the truth of our own lives. For some of us, it may not be an issue – I am comforted by the understanding of Christ as the culmination and fulfillment of all human stories, both Biblical and folkloric. But if anyone's sensibilities are jarred by this seemingly imaginative tale (after all, how did Luke know what the devil said to Jesus and vice-versa?), then let's consider the metaphorical possibilities. The signs are all there: the 40 days in the desert corresponding with the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering before they entered the promised land, the constant temptation by the devil during those 40 days, the closing note that the beaten tempter withdrew only "until an opportune time." Jesus may have told this story to the disciples as a parable of his own journey, one in which he was constantly tempted to take the easy way out, to win the people over with feeding miracle after feeding miracle, to claim his place as the temporal King of the world, to dazzle them all with mighty acts in full view of the religious and political leaders of the day. But Jesus did none of these things. Instead, he remained humble, on task, deflecting attention from his acts of compassion until his followers could understand that he came to establish a far different kingdom than they expected or thought they wanted. But the temptations must have come frequently, otherwise why the agony in the garden of Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed? Indeed, the temptation must have been there even on the cross, as suggested by Nikos Kazantzakis' powerful (if somewhat heterodox) novel, The Last Temptation of Christ. And whether this story happened literally as Luke wrote it or if we see it as a condensed narrative of Jesus' entire ministry, it surely has application for our own lives as we take our Lenten pause to consider our own temptations.

How do the three temptations of Jesus manifest themselves in our lives? None of us here this morning give any indication of thinking that we could transmogrify rocks into rolls. Good Baptist theology even moves the transubstantiation of bread into flesh into the realm of spiritual rather than physical reality. No one here has betrayed any indication of megalomania and styled themselves as Ruler of the Universe. Nor have I heard any of you fantasize about jumping off the tallest building in town – although I know at least one of our number has made a high jump strapped onto a bungee cord. Personally, I'm extremely shy of heights. Can these rather outlandish examples of temptation really speak to us?

Perhaps the easiest of the three temptations for us to understand is that to turn stones into bread. We live, after all, in a culture that glorifies immediate gratification. We want what we want when we want it. We may not be able to turn stones into bread but we can have a full meal from

frozen to piping hot in minutes from the microwave. We can instantly pay for our many purchases simply by waving a plastic card in the air, no more of that slow process of counting out money and change as a recent Visa commercial shows. We like things to be easy; no muss, no fuss. And we like to know that we are completely self-sufficient. But Jesus reminds us that we are not self-sufficient, that true life comes only when lived within the Word of God, in relationship with our loving Creator. The fast and instant food with which we gorge ourselves, the mountains of stuff that we buy, none of these can satisfy the hunger in our souls. No matter how much material wealth we have, we will still be looking to fill that God-shaped hole deep within us unless we turn to the Almighty and embrace our roles as beloved children. It is only in resting in the love of God that we can give up our drive to dominate the world around us. If we can assume the humility to know that God is in charge, then we can let God's creation be what God created it to be. We will not be tempted to turn stones into bread or to turn the gifts of this world or other people into objects for our use and pleasure.

Even though we may not suffer from delusions of grandeur and consider ourselves viable rulers of all humankind, we can still understand the temptation of power. It is something that our culture trains us to seek. The message is sent over and over again: look out for Number One, be the boss, make as much money as you can so you can determine your future. And to do these things, we are often invited to see ethics as situational, values as old-fashioned. Power over others is seductive for us. John J. Pilch, however, points out that Jesus never exercised power in the gospels, except in opposition to spirits and demons. As much as we may crave power for ourselves, we are equally prone to seeking power and glory for our tribe and nation. Some relatively benign examples of this may be seen in the modern tribalism of sports fandom. For those of you who remember last fall's World Series, St. Louis newspapers and fans were in high shriek mode following the revelation of a suspicious smudge of unknown substance on the pitching hand of Detroit's Kenny Rogers. Calls for immediate suspension and banishment from the game for the suspected cheater were loud and clear. In Detroit, however, the incident was shrugged off as "just part of the game." Likewise, baseball fans everywhere have been calling for the ouster of Barry Bonds, who stands poised to break Henry Aaron's record for most home runs in a career all while Bonds is under the shadow of investigation of steroid use. Baseball fans everywhere except in San Francisco, that is, where Bond just happens to be employed by the hometown Giants. Now those are really just lighthearted examples of this desire for tribal power but what about nationalism? What about the desire for the United States to be and be recognized as the most powerful nation on earth, even if it means nuclear proliferation, or the destabilization of governments that won't toe our line, or even the invasion of an oil producing nation under false pretenses? Isn't that just the old devilish temptation to power translated as power for our pack so that we can be one of the top dogs? Jesus reminds us that God alone is to be worshipped. If we are serious about living as God's beloved children, then we can give no allegiance to the masters of the short-cut or the sharp deal or the champions of *real politik*. In our culture, power generally equals prosperity. Writing for *Sojourners Magazine*, Michaela Bruzzese points out that all of Jesus' answers to the tempter are based on the teachings of Deuteronomy 6-8. The theme of these chapters, she writes, "is prosperity and its inherent dangers, specifically, fidelity to God in the midst of prosperity." She quotes from Deuteronomy 8:17-19, "Remember then, it is the Lord, your God, who gives you the power to acquire wealth.... But if you forget the Lord...I forewarn you...that you will perish utterly."

How many of you recognized the devil's tempting words to Jesus as the promise in Psalm 91, part of which we used as our Call to Worship this morning? The devil wanted Jesus to hear as literal the part of that promise about being born up and not striking his foot against a stone. As I mentioned, I've never been tempted to throw myself from a high building to see if God would send angels to protect me. But I have, at unwise times in my life, certainly lived as if I was trying to see just how much I could get away with and still have God love me. Lynn's not here this morning, so I can quote from a song by U2 without fear of reprisal: "I went out there / In search of experience / To taste and to touch / And to feel as much / As a man can / Before he repents." It's an ongoing temptation for many people, daring God to keep loving us no matter how far out of God's will we may step. Jesus, I think, would understand, but take a dim view: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

I mentioned earlier when I spoke of turning stones to bread the temptation to try to fill our honest need for God in our lives with many, many other things. I want to return to that idea so that I can relate to you some thoughts from the great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor whose writing on this passage I found to be compelling. In encouraging her readers to try the traditional disciplines of Lent, she writes this: "It is necessary... to find out what life is like with no comfort but God. I am convinced that 99 percent of us are addicted to something, whether it is eating, shopping, blaming or taking care of other people. The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone. That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying. Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick our pacifiers into our mouths and suck for all we are worth. They do not nourish us, but at least they plug the hole. To enter the wilderness is to leave them behind, and nothing is too small to give up. Even a chocolate bar will do. For 40 days, simply pay attention to how often your mind travels in that direction. Ask yourself why it happens when it happens. What is going on when you start craving a Mars bar? Are you hungry? Well, what is wrong with being hungry? Are you lonely? What is so bad about being alone? Try sitting with the feeling instead of fixing it and see what you find out. Chances are you will hear a voice in your head that keeps warning you what will happen if you give up your pacifier. "You'll starve. You'll go nuts. You won't be you anymore." If that does not work, the voice will move to level two: "That's not a pacifier. That's a power tool. Can't you tell the difference?" If you do not fall for that one, there is always level three: "If God really loves you, you can do whatever you want. Why waste your time on this dumb exercise?" If you do not know whom that voice belongs to, read Luke's story again. Then tell the devil to get lost and decide what you will do for Lent. Better yet, decide whose you will be. Worship the Lord your God and serve no one else. Expect great things, from God and from yourself. Believe that everything is possible. Why should any of us settle for less?"

Can Barbara Brown Taylor be right? Can we really defeat temptation? Jesus makes it look almost easy with his quick and decisive answers to the devil. But what about the rest of us poor slobs? Aren't we just creatures of habit, doomed to fail in the same way again and again? In Hebrews 4:15-16, we find this promise, that in Jesus, "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. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Just as Jesus had the power to

turn away from the mouth-watering prospect of bread after forty days of hunger, from the oh-so tempting opportunity to short-cut his way to his goal without suffering and death, to turn from making a splash with the big wheels in Jerusalem and leaving out the part of the story about serving the poor, so too God gives us the power to resist whatever temptations may come our way. It is possible, even, to see temptation as the opportunity for virtue and triumph, rather than failure. Robert Browning, whose poem “My Last Duchess” I read to you last month, also wrote about the Good News of temptation:

Why comes temptation, but for man to meet
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
And so be pedestaled in triumph?

With the power of God, available to us, we can triumph. Not through our own power. We cannot fill our God-shaped hole without God. But God is completely available for us. In our epistle passage for this morning, Romans 10:9-13, Paul tells us all that is necessary: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. ¹¹The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” ¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”” All that is needed to begin the journey with Jesus is to believe and to confess.

And so we are invited, my sisters and brothers, to join the journey anew this Lenten season. For most of us, this Lenten journey will simply be a new way of traveling the journey we are already on. For some of us, that journey with Jesus has been a part of our lives for as long as we can remember. For some of us, that journey began in the middle of life, in a time of crisis, or need, or joy. Some may be waiting even now to begin the journey. If you are just starting the journey or if you are moving into a new phase of your journey, I invite you to come, privately or publicly, tell me where you are in that journey and let us travel together with our Lord. Softly and tenderly, the one who sympathizes with our weaknesses, who was tempted just as we are, calls to us all this morning. He stands ready to lead us on our journey through the Lenten lands and into the grace and glory of Easter. Where Jesus calls, may we follow, with him, with him all the way.