

Temptation

It's a little bit of a schizoid Sunday. We have already made the switch from rejoicing in the innocence of a little child to confessing our own guilt, from the pure of heart to the tempted and fallen. It's a little like the divide that precedes our Scripture for this morning, when we make the jump between Jesus fulfilling all righteousness by his baptism and being publicly recognized as God's Beloved Son to the Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Today, we get the highs and lows and everything in-between. Sometimes, being a fallible human trying to walk in the way of Jesus is a little like riding a roller-coaster. Ain't it fun?

In some ways, this is a pretty easy passage to preach on. After all, we all face temptations of various kinds. This is, without a doubt, a constant in the human condition. If even Jesus was tempted, after all, then surely we must also confess temptation. And make no mistake about it, Jesus was tempted. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews makes that a cornerstone of his or her argument about the efficacy of Jesus' sacrifice: "For we do not have a high priest (meaning Jesus) who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin." The dominant culture of our time, the culture of consumerism, is fueled by temptation, proving just how ubiquitous and powerful the force of temptation is. We are tempted into buying things we don't really need, tempted to envision ourselves as people very different from who we are, tempted to make our own desires paramount in our lives despite the real needs of others who will be impacted. Temptation is all around us.

Most of the temptations we encounter, consider, do our best to overcome are what are commonly called "temptations of the flesh." These are the temptations that relate to our basic human appetites – food, sleep, sex, power – and we recognize our failings in these areas with commonly named sins – gluttony, sloth, lust, anger. I imagine we've all heard plenty of sermons on these topics over the years. In comparison with these very basic temptations, the temptations faced by Jesus in the wilderness must seem a little alien to us. It would be easy, even tempting, to think, "Well, these are the sorts of trials faced by the Messiah but not by an ordinary person such as me." I'm convinced, however, that the same temptations placed before Jesus are also temptations that are very real to us and I want to examine that possibility briefly this morning.

First, though, a quick word about the set-up of this story is in order. As I read this passage this week, I was struck by a truth that I know deeply. It is most easy to fall prey to temptation when we are weakened. The Accuser approaches Jesus when he is physically at his lowest. He has been in the wilderness for forty days and nights and fasting. For nearly seven weeks, he's been too hot in the day and too cold at night, with nothing to shelter him but his cloak. He has had enough to eat and drink to sustain life but not enough to be comfortable or healthy. I think we can imagine that his mouth and throat are parched, his stomach empty, his body weak. Now, few, if any, of us are likely to be in this situation for reason of a 40-day fast in the wilderness but all of us know what it is to be tired, hungry, thirsty and crabby. I know that I am particularly vulnerable to falling prey to the temptations of anger and putting myself before others when in that condition. It seems to me that the first thing this passage has to teach me and perhaps others as well is to be on guard when I'm not feeling my best. It's a good reminder not only to take care of myself so that I won't be so tempted but also to be ready to face those moments with an intentional equanimity. I've got to be able to say to myself, "I'm not feeling well so I must make the extra effort to be kind, thoughtful and loving." Not feeling 100% is not an excuse to yield to temptation. Jesus is proof of that.

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Of course, the first temptation offered by the devil plays off of this situation. “Jesus, you’re hungry. Make some bread.” On the surface of it, this temptation has very little to do with any of us. None of us, as far as I know, can make bread from stones. But, as Jesus points out, we do not live by bread alone. At one level, this temptation is about what one does to fill oneself or perhaps I should say what one does to feel fulfilled. Our dominant culture would have us confuse the fulfillment of physical desires with spiritual fulfillment. Hook up with this kind of person and your life will be wonderful. Live this kind of lifestyle and you will always be happy. Shop here, drive this, drink that and you will be the person you want to be. It is all, of course, patent nonsense. The yearning and emptiness that we sometimes feel is not our need for a particular diet or possession or even for that special other human. It is a need for God. Jesus quotes from Torah, from Deuteronomy 8:3, when he says, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Augustine of Hippo, some 400 years later, wrote, “Lord, you have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.” Twelve hundred years after that, the French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in (humans) a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This (they try) in vain to fill with everything around (them), seeking in things that are not there the help (they) cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and unchangeable object; in other words by God (God)self.” In 1997, U2 had a hit song in which Bono sang about “lookin’ for to fill that God-shaped hole.” The hunger for God is a real and universal hunger but the dominant system of today’s world would have us ignore it in favor of more and more elaborate bread.

Many commentators have also pointed out the connection between this first temptation and Jesus’ mission of taking good news to the poor. Buried in these brief words from the tempter, they suggest, is the inference that in order to fulfill his calling as Messiah, Jesus will need to miraculously answer the expectations of the people, whether with food from heaven like the manna their ancestors received or by a show of force against Rome or by simply revealing his access to the might of God. We see again and again in the Gospels how Jesus subverts these expectations. True, he twice performs miraculous feedings but only after he himself has been the cause of hunger by drawing people into remote places to hear him speak. He does not simply go into poor villages and cause bread to rain down. Instead, he points to himself, to his way of life and teachings, as the Bread of Life. And he continually points to God.

Again, this seems to have little connection with us. But in our relative wealth of things and talents, do we not also stand in temptation of letting “doing for others” become an addiction rather than something we do out of gratitude for what God has done for us? Is it right for us to pursue good deeds, whether done in hours of volunteerism or in our jobs, to the point that we have no time left for our families, our friends, or for appropriate self-care? I am grateful to this congregation for so many loving sisters and brothers who remind me to take the time from ministry I need to care for my family and myself. Not all of my colleagues are so blessed and I see some who are burning themselves out because no one will remind them that they are not Super-Pastor. I encourage all of you who serve others as friends, teachers, parents, colleagues, service providers – don’t forget to take time to nurture the other relationships that nurture you,

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especially your relationship with God. We do not live by bread alone, nor by the praise or even gratitude of mortals, but by seeking the presence and will of the Living God in our lives.

In some ways, the next suggestion offered by the tempter is connected with this idea. The devil takes Jesus to the highest point in Judea: the pinnacle atop the Temple atop Mount Zion. "Throw yourself down," he says. "Dude, show 'em what you got." Similar to the bread, this can be understood as the temptation for Jesus to reveal himself in glory. Now, if any of us were to be tempted to stand up on a high place and proclaim that the angels would save us from harm if we threw ourselves off, the nice policemen would lead us quietly away and we would become intimately acquainted with padded rooms and calming medications. But aren't all of us tempted from time to time to "show 'em what we got?" Don't all of us like to hear, "Oh, my, don't you do THAT well... aren't you smart... what a talent you have..." and so on? Don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with utilizing your God-given gifts and talents to the fullest, or with receiving acclamation for doing so. What's important is why we do those things. Do we do them to fill our own need for recognition, yet another false way of filling the "God-shaped hole" or do we do them for the joy of who God made us to be and in service of others? Do we remember to give thanks to God for our abilities? It's a fine line between being all that God wants us to be and letting our own abilities become our addiction and our idol.

That's why we must also be careful of this temptation in reverse. As Jesus said, we must not hide our lights under a bushel basket. If God gives a talent, an ability, a gift, then it is to be used in the service of God and God's people, not ignored and wasted. It is just as dishonoring to God to continually say, "Oh, no, I really couldn't... oh, no, I just don't have anything to offer," as to continually do things that shout "Look at me! Aren't I grand!" Both attitudes reveal a kind of perverse egotism, where either our positive or our negative capabilities are enthroned in the place of God.

There is also in this temptation, as Jesus said, the element of putting God to the test. Again, we're not likely to call on God to send angels to save us from deliberately throwing ourselves from a cliff, at least not physically. But it is certainly true that all of us from time to time do things that we know are of dubious wisdom and then ask God to shield us from the consequences. I think it's often true that the best thing God could do for us in these circumstances is to allow us to suffer natural consequences to our actions so that we learn not to be so darn stupid in the future. Putting God to the test is to forget that God is God and instead to act as if God is some sort of divine favor machine. If we say the right magic words, if we know the combination, if we hold our mouths just right as we pull the handle, then God will come through with whatever we want. Friends, in case you haven't learned this yet, it don't work that way. Nor does God cut deals. A lot of immature prayers take the form, "Oh, God, if you'll just... then I promise I'll..." Our God promises to love us and to forgive us and in this God is faithful. But these things are done on God's terms, in God's way, in God's time, none of which is always explicable to us. The great play, "Amadeus," by Peter Shaffer tells the story of how a God-fearing young composer, Antonio Salieri, attempts to make a deal with God and believes it has been accepted. "My one desire was to join all the other composers who had celebrated His glory through the long Italian past!... Every Sunday I saw Him in church, painted on the flaking wall. I don't mean Christ. The Christs of Lombardy are simpering sillies with lambkins in their arms. No: I mean an old candle-smoked God in a mulberry robe, staring at the world with

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dealer's eyes. Tradesmen had put him up there. Those eyes made bargains, real and irreversible. "You give me so – I'll give you so! No more. No less." The night before I left Legnago forever, I went to see Him and made a bargain with Him myself! I was a sober sixteen, filled with a desperate sense of *right*. I knelt before the God of Bargains, and I prayed through the moldering plaster with all my soul. '*Signore*, let me be a composer! Grant me sufficient fame to enjoy it. In return, I will live with virtue. I will strive to better the lot of my fellows. And I will honor You with much music all the days of my life!' As I said *Amen*, I saw His eyes flare. '*Bene*. Go forth, Antonio. Serve Me and mankind, and you will be blessed!' ... 'Grazie!' I called back. 'I am your servant for life!'"

And, indeed, Salieri goes on to lead an exemplary life and to receive acclaim for his compositions. All is well until he hears the music of the young prodigy Mozart. He feels cheated by God because, as he says, "Tonight at an inn somewhere in this city stands a giggling child who can put on paper, without actually setting down his billiard cue, casual notes which turn my most considered ones into lifeless scratches." Salieri vows that he will have his revenge on God by destroying Mozart, whose talent can only be the result of his being the beloved one of God – indeed, Mozart's middle name, Amadeus, from which the play takes its name, means "God's beloved." In Shaffer's play, Salieri does indeed cause Mozart's death but what is true both in fiction and in real life is that it is Mozart's music that is celebrated, while Salieri's is forgotten. By the way, I have a recording of some of Salieri's concertos. They're quite good. But they're not Mozart. The fictional Salieri put God to the test. One reason why the play and the film were so successful is that we find this scenario all too familiar.

"All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." It's just a different verse of a very familiar song. All around us, we hear voices clamoring for our attention and not just our attention but our allegiance. The powers of the dominant culture, the world's domination system as theologian Walter Wink calls it, all recognize that hole within us and want us to think that they can fill it. Possessions, physical attractiveness, power, tribe, nation – these are our true American idols. If any one of these things or any combination of them make us turn away from the path of Jesus, relinquish our quest to walk in the way of God, keep us from humility, justice and mercy, then we have fallen into idolatry as sure as if we'd bent the knee and offered prayer to the Tempter. Jesus rebuked Satan and stood firm for the worship of God but if we are honest, my friends, we must confess that we have not always done so.

But this is the season for confession and we have both confessed this day and heard the good news of God's love and forgiveness. It is not in Matthew's account but Luke remarks that the devil only departed from Jesus, "until an opportune time." Jesus was tested again and again and so shall we be. It's why he taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." "Do not permit us, O God, to take that path. God, don't let me do anything today that leads me away from you. Don't let me do anything stupid." In the Catholic and Anglican tradition, there is a prayer service at the end of the day called Compline. In many versions of this liturgy, the service includes a quotation from I Peter: "Beloved in Christ, be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist, steadfast in the faith." My sisters and my brothers, our Lord and God has mercy on us. Now it is our part to resist temptation and to focus on walking each day in the path of Jesus, who leads us away from temptation and towards the ever-fresh mercy and love of God. For our God and for

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God's Christ and for the Spirit that comes from them to dwell in our hearts and teach us the way of life, let us give thanks. Amen.