

The Place of Temptation

Lent 1, c, 2/21/10

Luke 4:1-13

A little boy named Bobby ached for a new bicycle. His plan was to save his dimes and quarters until he finally had enough to buy that new bicycle that he spied at bicycle shop. Each night he took his concern to God. Kneeling beside his bed, he prayed, "Dear God, please help me save for the new bicycle.... and please Lord, don't let the ice cream man come down our street tomorrow."

An overweight business man decided it was time to shed some excess pounds. He took his new diet seriously, even changing his driving route to work to avoid his favorite bakery. One morning, however, he arrived at work carrying a gigantic coffeecake. Everyone in the office scolded him, but his smile remained.

"This is very special coffeecake," he explained. "I accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window were a host of goodies. I felt this was no accident, so I prayed, 'Lord, if you want me to have one of these delicious coffeecakes with pecans and frosted white icing, show me by letting me have a parking place directly in front of the bakery.'

"And sure enough, the 8th time around the block, there it was!"

The same theme is in the great prayer Jesus taught us, "lead us not into temptation." Often, temptation is being drawn into, persuaded into an act that is not necessarily evil, but an act that is just not right for that individual at that time.

For Bobby, having set his heart on saving for the bicycle, the ice cream man is temptation. His prayer is appropriate indeed.

For the businessman, having set his heart on a fitter body, having committed himself to that path of changing, the coffee cake is temptation, indeed. His finding of excuses would do little to satisfy even his own mind after he ate the coffee cake and felt his belly bulge.

Lent is the season where we attune ourselves in a careful way to small temptations such as these, and to large temptations, such as Jesus experienced in the wilderness, in an effort to better fit ourselves for service in Christ's name. It can be a time of fasting; of prayer; of breaking our routines and peering deeply into the habits of our lives to discern what is not holy there, what should change. So it then becomes a time of doing battle with the spirit that stands in the way of our positive change, called the Adversary in the Bible, or Satan.

Jesus of Nazareth knew that he was called by God in a special way. We will never understand fully how difficult it was for him to respond. But at times we are prone to make light of the human side of Jesus, the man who must struggle at *every* turn to remain faithful to his call. In this morning's scripture passage, I suspect, we come as just about as close as we ever will to seeing Jesus' spirit at war with his flesh.

Remember he had just been baptized by John in the River Jordan and then driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, the place of temptation. 40 days alone, no food, no water, no comfort. It would be enough to drive most of us mad. Certainly the tempter, the Evil One, the Adversary would have had a ripe candidate in Jesus.

But how did Jesus respond?

-- We do not live by bread alone, but by the Spirit of God.

-- I will not take earthly power, if it means sacrificing any of my commitment to God.

-- We don't honor God, by giving God a performance test.

In each case Jesus submits himself to the authority of God and refuses to make any sort of deal with this Tempter, or to find some rationalization for doing what he knew would be wrong.

What about us? For each of us...what are our temptations? How do we deal with them?

For many of us the greatest temptation is to try to weasel out of responsibility that is rightly ours. When young children do this, they often just accept the blame for doing wrong and suffer the consequences. Older youth and adults have more sophisticated defense mechanisms so that we can live with ourselves... the chief culprit is rationalization of the wrong such as:

-the father who refuses to pay child support because he is denied by the court what he thinks are fair visitation terms,

-or the spouse who cheats on her partner by saying "what he doesn't know won't hurt him."

-or the taxpayer who does not report income on those intimidating forms this time of year by saying, "well everybody else is doing it."

-or the family that turns off the TV, throws away the mail, closes their ears, eyes and hearts to the cries of the truly needy, the hungry, the homeless, the refugees.... those to whom Jesus says we must respond, for whom we are

responsible.

- or the man who enjoys the benefits of living in this country but believes he is the ultimate judge of the tax laws here... and in a violent rage, burns down his home and uses an airplane as a lethal weapon...upon innocent people... in an act one would think beyond even any far-fetched rationalizing...

- or the man so many have admired, Tiger Woods, who said yesterday, "I ran straight through the boundaries that a married couple should live by. I thought I could get away with whatever I wanted to. I felt that I had worked hard my entire life and deserved to enjoy all the temptations around inc. I felt I was entitled. Thanks to money and fame, I didn't have to go far to find them."

Now, I'm not going to try to judge his sincerity, but at least he said the right things yesterday after confessing his capitulation to temptations, He said, "I was wrong and I was foolish. I don't get to play by different rules; the same boundaries that apply to everyone apply to me. I brought this shame on myself. "<sup>i</sup>

Let me share some tips for how we can stop the work of the tempter in our lives.

First, there is a whole class of temptations that is openly condemned by society. They are easy to spot: sexual infidelity; criminal acts and especially violent ones; lying; cheating; and the like. We all know those things are wrong and thankfully we don't even entertain them in our minds. But we must beware of these if we find ourselves thinking, "But nobody would ever know", or "those rules are for sheep, I'm above that," we are flirting with trouble.

Then there is a whole set of temptations that come at us constantly that are not wrong in themselves, but are wrong for us at a particular time and situation in our lives, or wrong because our motivation is impure. The coffee cake for the businessman is wrong for him now.

This class of temptations cannot be categorized easily; they are more a matter of the heart than a matter for neighbors and friends to judge.

To test a temptation, we can ask ourselves these questions:

- i) Does this act bring glory to me as its main benefit?
- 2) Does this act manipulate someone to do my bidding?
- 3) Would I be embarrassed in a circle of friends to share I did this?

- 4) Is the goal of this action to make me more independent, more separate from the needs and claims of others?
- 5) In a difficult situation, is this just the easy way out?

If the answer to any one of these questions is "yes," I probably have a temptation to sin rattling in my head. So what do I do about?

First, realize that even contemplating something out of line for my spiritual pilgrimage is dangerous. It is amazing what rationalizations a tormented mind with time to concentrate can come up with. Jesus taught that the evil deed begins with the evil thought.

"You have heard that it was said "you shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.

You have heard that it was said, 'you shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

The way to deal with a temptation is to nip it in the bud. Give it no opportunity to flower. Recognize it quickly, honestly and deal with it.

A young married woman visits in her pastor's office. She describes to him a marriage gone stale, a husband with misplaced priorities, a situation in which she has excessive time on her hands and a longing for romance in her heart. "Yesterday I had lunch with a fellow I almost married," she confesses, "I hadn't seen him in years. Did I do wrong?" Of course there is nothing wrong with a simple lunch with an old friend- or is there?

Certainly there is danger. A deed begins with a thought. The Chinese have a wonderful proverb that teaches this point:

"You can't keep a bird from flying over your head, but you can keep it from building a nest in your hair."

It is said that opportunity knocks only once, but temptation bangs on your door for years. It is true, isn't it? No matter how far we progress on the path of sanctification, we shall never be free of temptation. Such is the spiritual battleground on which we live, but we can get wiser about dealing with temptation.

In a parallel to Christian faith so clear that it is almost prophetic, hundreds of years before Jesus the ancient Greeks told a story about one of their heroes, Orpheus,

the paragon of music, riding with Jason and the Argonauts upon a ship at sea. Far from land and far from home they heard the beautiful melody of the Sirens...a song so beautiful and enchanting that for ages sailors had steered their ships toward the music only to have their ships destroyed on rocky shoals. The Sirens would then collect their spoils from the wreckage.

But on this occasion the sailors did not heed the song of the Sirens and they sailed on by in perfect safety. Why? Orpheus, the music of his song, was so much sweeter and so much more enchanting than that of the Sirens, that the sailors were not tempted to their destruction!<sup>i</sup>

Friends, this is our way as well. The calling spirit of Christ to you and me- if we will listen- is so much sweeter, so much more satisfying than anything this world can tempt us with. Intently follow Christ's guidance and that alone. You will not fall. You will not fail. God's promise. Amen.

i <http://www.latimes.com/sports/1a-sp---ti<sup>g</sup>er-Woods20-2010feb20,0,1214109.sto<sup>ry</sup>>

ii" The *Argonautica* (Greek: Αργοναυτική) is a Greek epic poem written by Apollonius Rhodius in the 3rd century BC. Orpheus took part in this adventure and used his skills to aid his companions. Chiron had told Jason that without the aid of Orpheus, the Argonauts would never be able to pass the Sirens- the same Sirens encountered by Odysseus in Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey*. The Sirens lived on three small, rocky islands called Sirenur scopuli and sang beautiful songs that enticed sailors to come to them, which resulted in the crashing of their ship into the islands. When Orpheus heard their voices, he drew his lyre and played music that was more beautiful and louder, drowning out the Sirens' bewitching songs." at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orpheus>