

Lent I, March 6, 2022

Luke 4:1-13

It really doesn't have to be bread, power, or safety. Temptations, I mean.

In today's reading the devil tries to seduce Jesus  
 with the promise of bread when he's hungry,  
 the glory and power of ruling the world,  
 and the promise of rescue—and all of them paired with the suggestion  
 that God is not strong enough or willing enough or caring enough  
 to give Jesus what he deserves to have.

And all Jesus has to do in return is to stop trusting God.

You see, temptation isn't often temptation *toward* something –  
 that is, doing something we shouldn't do –  
 but rather it is the temptation *away* from something;  
 in this case, to move away from  
 or leave behind our relationship with God.

For instance, notice how each of the temptations  
 seeks to erode Jesus' confidence in his relationship with God  
 and therefore seeks to undermine Jesus' identity  
 as God's Beloved Son--  
 but not so much his nature or identity as "divine"  
 but his identity as a human being.  
 In other words, the devil is trying to convince him  
 that being human makes him unworthy of God's love and care. . .  
 and that he needs to take matters into his own hands.

What this means for us is that the only way we can resist that temptation  
 to move away from trust in God's love and care  
 is to remember and take heart and take courage from the truth—  
 that God loves us more than anything. . .

loves all of us enough to send God's only Son into the world  
 to take on our lot and life, to suffer the same temptations and wants,  
 to be rejected as we often feel rejected,  
 and, finally to die as a human being. .as we will die.  
 And all of this Jesus becomes and does so that may know  
 that God is with us and in us and for us and will be so forever.

Now, I know that I, for one, need to hear that promise declared again and again  
 in the face of all the messages to the contrary—  
 and I suspect all of you, sitting in front of me,  
 need to hear that word of good news as well.  
 So while I could close this off right now with that comforting assurance,  
 I won't. . .because I want to take another run at this story.

Bread. Power. Security. Those at the temptations Jesus confronts.  
 But what is actually going on here? Is the devil trying to get Jesus  
 to *use* his divine authority and power as the Son of God. . .  
 or, as Anna Howell sees it, is the devil is trying to get Jesus  
 to *misuse* his divine authority and power in a way  
 that minimizes or even disparages his humanity  
 by taking care of own needs rather than waiting for God  
 to take provide what is needed.

Howell, a clergyperson from North Carolina,  
 suggests that Jesus is being asked to make bread  
 that would feed only himself, satisfy only his hunger—  
 but that’s not really Jesus’ style, she says.  
 Indeed, the one time he does perform a bread-related miracle,  
 he makes enough to feed five thousand. . .not just himself.

In addition, she continues, “the bread Christ will ultimately give—  
 which is his Body, broken for the world, given for us and to us—  
 demonstrates that he is the living bread that feeds everyone.”  
 Thus, in such a way, Jesus also subverts earthly notions of power—  
 which is the second temptation--by offering himself as a sacrifice  
 that feeds and saves everyone and everything—  
 including the stone that stays a stone and doesn’t become a sandwich.

After two years of a global pandemic that has taken six million lives worldwide,  
 we’ve had ample opportunity to witness life crumble into ashes and dust.  
 And this week, as our sisters and brothers in Ukraine--and Russia--  
 face the terrors and losses of war, we are once again asked to consider  
 what it means that all of us, regardless of where we live  
 or what political views we espouse or the temptations we face--  
 that all of us are small, vulnerable, defenseless. . .and mortal.  
 “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

In many ways, this reality of being human. . .and being vulnerable, defenseless, and mortal. . .  
 is the same reality Jesus wrestles with in our Gospel reading today.

At his baptism, Jesus hears the bottom-line truth about his identity—  
 that is, who and what he is: namely, that he is God’s Son, precious and beloved.  
 But when the Spirit leads him into the wilderness,  
 he has to face a series of powerful assaults on that truth. He has to learn how to discern  
 or discover God's presence in a bleak and lonely wasteland.  
 As Debie Thomas, a clergyperson from the Bay area, phrases it:  
 He has to learn to trust that he can be beloved *and* famished,  
 valued and vulnerable at the same time.

And that learning. . .those lessons. . .that discernment. . .  
happens by means of these three temptations--  
temptations that he grapples with in the following way.

The first temptation targets Jesus's hunger.

“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.”

Could he do so? Of course, he could. He turned water into the wine, didn't he?

Turning stones into bread couldn't or can't be all that difficult.

But the core of this temptation, Thomas says,

implies that God's Beloved Son shouldn't be hungry

because, in the devil's economy, desires that go unmet or unfulfilled

are unnecessary aberrations or flaws in the system—

in this arrangement between God and human beings.

So by inviting Jesus to magically satisfy his hunger,

the devil invites Jesus to deny the reality of his human-ness—

to “cheat” his way to satisfaction and fulfillment

instead waiting for and leaning into or trusting God

to provide what is needed. . .to give that which fills and lasts.

The second temptation targets Jesus's ego. Fame. Visibility. Recognition. Clout.

A kingdom to end all kingdoms. Power here and now. All attractive, right?

Again, the implication is that God's beloved Son. . .

or God's beloved children. . .need not live or labour in obscurity.

Instead, to be God's child is to bask in glory under the stage lights:

visible, applauded, admired, and envied.

Surely, a God who really, truly loves us would never “abandon” us

to a life the world considers insignificant, unimportant and unenviable.

Surely there must be some benefit. . .some tangible sign of influence or power  
that comes with our belonging to God.

Thus, the temptation. . .and the question. . .for us

is whether we can and will embrace Jesus's version of significance—

which is a significance borne of humility and surrender

rather than that which is grasped and flaunted.

I mean, how important is it to us to be noticed? Praised? Liked?

Is our belief in God's love dependent upon a definition of success  
that doesn't come from God at all?

Can we trust that God sees us even when the powers-that-be do not?

Can our lives as God's beloved ones seek to practice humility?

You see, the uncomfortable truth about authentic Christian power

is that it resides in weakness and sacrifice and surrender.

While it is true that Jesus is lifted up, he's lifted *up on a cross*.

His power is the power of self-surrender for the sake of love.

The third temptation targets Jesus's vulnerability.

“God will command the angels concerning you, to protect you.”

The devil is implying that if we are beloved of God,  
then God will surely keep us safe:

Safe from physical and emotional harm; safe from frailty and disease;  
safe from accidents and trauma; safe from loss and from death.

And that is such an enticing lie, because it targets our deepest fears  
about what it means to be human in a broken, dangerous world.

We want so much to believe that we can leverage  
our identity as the beloved of God

and thereby turn that status into a kind of impenetrable shield. . .

that we can get God to guarantee us swift and perfect rescue  
if we just believe hard enough or have enough faith.

But if the cross teaches us anything, it teaches us

that God's precious ones still bleed, still ache, and still die.

As Thomas captures it so beautifully:

We are loved in our vulnerability. . .not out of it.

We are the children of a God who *accompanies* us in our suffering—  
not a God who guarantees us a lifetime of immunity from it.

And, as hard as it is to hear those words, that is good news.

And why is the reality of suffering and dying good news?

Well, it is *because we are the children of a God who resurrects--  
that is, who gives rest to the weary, comfort to the mourning and life to the dead.*

Thus, there is no suffering we will ever endure that God cannot and will not redeem—  
that is, turn into something of value and worth.

The story of humanity is not a story that ends in despair

but a story that culminates at an empty tomb,

in a kingdom and a reign of hope and healing, of consolation and joy.

So, three temptations. . .and, in a way, three invitations to us to consider:

But what do **we** do with them? Well, the story of Jesus's struggles in the wilderness  
brings the ancient story of human temptation full circle.

"Don't you want be like God?" is the question the snake poses  
to Adam and Eve in the lushness of the first garden.

But here, in the wilderness, the devil offers Jesus

a subtle and clever inversion of that primordial questions:

"Do you want to be be fully human? Can and will you exercise restraint?

Give up the desire for power? Accept danger?

Can you bear what it means to be mortal. . .to die. . .and to still trust?"

If Jesus' forty days in the wilderness is a time for the Son of God to decide who he is  
 and how he will live out his calling--then, Thomas says, here is what he chooses:  
 Emptiness over fullness; Obscurity over honour; and vulnerability over rescue.  
 At every instance when Jesus could reach for the magical,  
 the glorious, and the safe, he reaches instead for the ordinary,  
 the human and the risky—taking the leap of faith as a theologian put it.

Finally, Luke tells us that Jesus doesn't choose to enter the wilderness.  
 Instead, the Spirit leads him there.  
 Now, we don't always choose to enter our wildernesses, either.  
 Nobody volunteers for pain, loss, danger, or terror, but they happen anyway.

And whether they come to us in the guise of a hospital waiting room, a thorny relationship,  
 a troubled child, a sudden death, loss of mobility or memory, or a crippling panic attack,  
 the wilderness shows up on our doorsteps, unbidden and unwelcome,  
 and, what is even worse, is that it insists on staying around,  
 sometimes for a very long time.

And, hard as it to say, to be honest, sometimes it is God's own Spirit  
 who drives us into. . .or brings or drags us. . .into those barren places  
 Now does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to us  
 or that God wants us to suffer?

No, I don't believe that. Instead, what I believe it means  
 that God can redeem even the most painful periods of our lives,  
 if. . .and when. . .we willing to wait. . .to wait for God  
 to come and to be with us wherever we are. . .  
 and to stay with us wherever God leads us into the future. . .

to trust that, for God, it is enough for us to be human. . .  
 simply human; not superhuman nor subhuman—  
 just plain, ordinary human beings. . .beloved human beings. . .  
 who have relationship with a loving God . . .  
 a relationship that shows itself in the worship of God,  
 in service to God. . .and trust in God.

Amen.           SDG