

Lent I (RCL/C): "So Tempting!"
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13
March 8-9, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

So, what temptations did you bump into this past week?? Maybe to eat or drink something on Thursday that you'd just "given up" on Wednesday (Ash Wednesday)? Or maybe you were tempted to **spit out** the sharp word instead of **swallowing** it, like your conscience counseled you to do? 'Could be, you were tempted to **look** the other way or literally **step away** from a situation you could have improved, corrected, defused by your courageous and helpful intervention. Maybe the temptation didn't simply bump into you. It could have been more like a head-on collision between something or someone very enticing and all you believe and hold most sacred.

The lure to lie, to cheat, to slack off, to swear, to skip worship, to blurt something out which is better left unsaid, to stay painfully, sinfully silent when we **should** speak out, these are temptations we recognize and understand. Not so much the temptations Jesus faces in today's Gospel. My soul's never broken into a sweat, struggling over whether I should turn stones into bread. I've never had to invest spiritual energy fighting against devil worship. I've certainly never been tempted to throw myself down from a skyscraper. This story is a good example of why we might be tempted to say, "The Bible's irrelevant to me. It's fine to read what Jesus went through, but 'Where's the beef'?? What does **Jesus'** story have to do with **my** story? Where's the soul food in this for **me**??"

Well, let's pay attention to how today's story starts:

*Jesus, **full of the Holy Spirit**, returned from the Jordan [after being baptized] and was **led by the Spirit** in the wilderness, where for 40 days **he was tempted by the devil**. (Luke 4:1-2a)*

Jesus isn't tempted in the wilderness because it's some kind of God-forsaken place. For starters, Jesus is present, and He **is** God. Secondly, St. Luke is careful to say Jesus is not only **full of the Holy Spirit** following His baptism, He's actually **led by** the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where He's tempted. We're not tempted because God is **absent**. We're able to stand up to temptation because God is **present**, in **power**. God is with us when we're on the struggle bus of temptation.

Jesus' temptations may actually be more familiar than we realize at first glance. We haven't been tempted to turn stones into bread, but I'm pretty sure we've all been tempted occasionally to use whatever power we **do** have or whatever spiritual gift we've been given to serve **ourselves** rather than God or neighbor. Jesus was willing to use His power as the Son of God to feed 20,000 people from 5 loaves and 2 fish, but He wasn't willing to turn 1 stone into 1 loaf of sourdough to quell His own hunger. There were certainly chances along the Way for Jesus to conjure up more meals and gain more grateful followers, but ultimately He wasn't going to provide "bread and circuses" instead of saving souls.

Nor was our Lord willing to worship a false god to gain "political" power, as in the second temptation when He refuses to bend a knee to the devil who promises Jesus earthly glory and satanic authority. Jesus was never willing to strike a bargain with the devil to "win an election," so to speak, something a lot of politicians **can't** say. But, as always, when I point a finger at somebody else, I find 2 more fingers pointing back at myself. The Holy Spirit challenges and invites me to examine my own conscience and search my own heart for times worldly praise has meant more to me than Heaven's approval, times I've ignored or "bent" a commandment to be in people's good graces instead of God's. Pastors are not immune from the desire to be popular, and pastors, too, are called to admit, "I was wrong, Lord, and I'm sorry. Please forgive me, in Your mercy. Help me to cherish only what **You** cherish."

Then there's that 3rd temptation that seems oddest of all: "Throw yourself down!" Remember Philippe Petite, the tightrope walker who moved so gracefully on a razor thin wire high above the nave of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and also in the open air between the 2 World Trade towers? Maybe **he** had a crazy impulse to throw himself down, but I doubt it. This is a temptation that seems downright far-fetched, until we study and learn more. Some Bible scholars tell us Jesus' temptation was actually oriented to the future, when He was anticipating the cross, praying in Gethsemane that the cup of suffering would pass Him by, or perhaps when He was **on** the cross, pelted by the taunts of those who mocked Him and sneered, "If you **are** the Son of God, come down from that cross!" The temptation in today's Gospel is for our Lord to jump from the pinnacle of the Temple, which of course is in Jerusalem,

just like Calvary. Someone has expanded the temptation to the whole time of Jesus' public ministry: "Often, too, he must have heard the voice of the last and most plausible temptation, the temptation to make his faith in his Father depend upon his being shielded from disaster."¹

Now this begins to sound familiar. This is where Jesus' temptation begins to sound a lot like ours: the temptation to assume that bad things don't happen to good people. The temptation to turn our backs on God when undeserved suffering comes our way or afflicts those we love. "It **must** be true, they have thought, that if a person is good enough, he will have a protecting angel at his side"²: a protecting angel, like the ones we just heard about in Psalm 91:

¹¹For God will give the angels charge over you,
to guard you in all your ways.

¹²Upon their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.

Those verses undergird our Judeo-Christian belief in guardian angels. But life experience tells us that despite our belief in the existence of heavenly messengers whom we call angels, accidents still happen and tragedies still occur. Our guardian angels save us from some catastrophes, but not necessarily all. Illness, accident, natural or human-made disaster are equal opportunity. They occur whether a person leads a life of faith or not, whether people faithfully worship God and lovingly serve their neighbor or not. That's precisely the reason Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote the book *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and why it's been so popular. People are puzzled by suffering. In the midst of our worst suffering we may very well be tempted to think that a God who allows such suffering is not as powerful or loving or real, as we once thought.

Likewise, temptation assails, assaults, everyone. One scholar has written:

Being committed to the way of God in the world does not exempt one from the struggle. In fact, it is those who are most engaged in the way of God who seem to experience most intensely the opposition of evil.³

Sometimes the temptation may be to allow the ends to justify the means: the "ends" of alleviating or preventing suffering to justify doing just about anything to get there. Or the temptation may be to give up in the face of what seem like overwhelming odds against the triumph of good and God. But as Anne

Lamott writes at the end of her book *Somehow: Thoughts on Love*, “...we can’t give up on love battling last or we are truly doomed.”⁴

At the beginning I asked you to remember some of the temptations you’ve experienced in the last week. I **didn’t** ask you who won: the devil on one shoulder or the angel on the other. At times we all fail and fall hard. Martin Luther wrote that when he was assaulted by the devil he’d cry out, “I am baptized! I am baptized!” He was announcing to the devil and reminding himself that our baptism is the strongest possible armor against temptation, for through it we have access to the power of Christ’s death and resurrection. Our baptism makes possible a daily dying to sin and rising to new life. It showers us in grace. It strengthens us against temptation, and it grants forgiveness when we fall. In all things we also find comfort in that, as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews:

...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. (Hebrews 4:15-16)

Amen.

¹*Luke (Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 8, Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), p. 88.*

²*Ibid, p. 87.*

³Fred B. Craddock, *Luke (Interpretation, Louisville: John Knox, 1990), p. 55.*

⁴Anne Lamott, *Somehow: Thoughts on Love* (NY: Riverhead Books, 2024), p. 183.

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