

## Temptations, Tests, and Trials

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year C. February 21, 2010. (Text: Luke 4:1-13)*

Our culture is ambivalent about the Devil. Sophisticated people quickly tell us that there's no such creature as Satan, he's just a character in a myth, You know: Marlowe and Goethe, Mephistopheles and Dr. Faustus. But at the same time, even sophisticated people have to acknowledge that our civilization has been obsessed with stories about the Devil as far back as literature can take us. And in our time the classic old stories have morphed into films that portray this mythic character in ways that can make us smell the fires of hell. (Google "devil movies" and you'll get 36,500,000 hits.)

If Satan *is* just a myth, we're dealing with a very compelling myth, whose power is so great that even our materialistic age still believes it. The idea of the Devil is not fading away. So maybe we should take it seriously, even if we choose, at least for the moment, to stay agnostic about whether there's an actual malevolent "entity" behind the myth.

On the First Sunday in Lent the Church has given us a context in which to take the Devil seriously. In the fourth chapter of Luke, right after the Spirit has come upon him and Jesus has heard the Voice of God say "*You are my Son, my beloved, with you I am well-pleased,*" we read: "*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.*"

Let's be clear about what a *temptation* is. A temptation is an invitation, maybe a seduction, that's aiming to get you to do something you know (or at least suspect) might be wrong. Temptations have to involve a degree of premeditation. That the Spirit led him into the wilderness to encounter the Devil means it was God's *plan* for Jesus to be tempted. And at the end of the story of Jesus' face-off in the desert with the Prince of Darkness, the gospel adds: "*When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him UNTIL AN OPPORTUNE TIME.*"

Jesus struggled with temptations throughout his life. After the Last Supper, in the Upper Room with his friends, he said to them, "*You are those who have stood with me in all my trials.*" The Biblical word for "trial" and "test" is the exactly the same word as "temptation." A temptation may also be a *trial* or a *test*. This insight helps us understand why it was essential for Christ to experience "temptations," and why it's also essential for us. We never know the strength of our faith in God until our faith is tested. Be warned: tests of your faith will often *feel* like temptations —because that's what they *will* be!

All of us experience tests, trials, and temptations, and not just now and then. Being caught between conflicting desires is a common human experience —one that cartoonists portray as a person with a little red devil on one shoulder and an angel with a halo on the other shoulder, both whispering in an ear. In *Romans*, Paul wrote, "*I find it to be a law that when I want to do good, evil lies close at hand.*" [ROM. 7:21]

Jesus was a human being, and he had to struggle with conflicting desires, ambitions, and dreams just as we do. Keep in mind that a proper understanding of "temptation" requires that it be truly possible for the one being tempted (no matter whether it's me or it's Jesus) to *succumb* to the temptation. For a temptation really to *be* a temptation, it has to exert genuine attraction on the one being tempted. If it had been actually impossible for Jesus give in to any of Satan's temptations, then they could not have been *real* temptations. But we know they were, in fact, quite real. To be effective, every temptation has to engage

with a desire, dream or aspiration present in our mind. The fact is: we can only be tempted by something we *want*.

I say we can only be *tempted* through an appeal to our natural inclinations —but that doesn't mean only our fleshly inclinations. "Temptations of the flesh" are raw and obvious: appealing to our appetites for food and drink, or money, or power, or fame, or sexual conquest. Embezzling from the company, having an affair with your next door neighbor, gluttony and drug abuse ...these are pretty easy to identify as wrong. But the most dangerous temptations and the hardest ones to spot pose as appeals to the so-called "better angel" of our nature —our honest desire to do good things, love our neighbors, and achieve noble goals. Remember Paul's warning: As soon as you have decided to do a good deed, be on guard! The Tempter is going to be right there, trying to turn your fine intentions into something with completely opposite results.

When Jesus encountered the Devil in the Judean desert, the Prince of Darkness offered him three temptations, each of which had at least one apparently innocent (if not positively good) side, as well as a sinister dark side. The first temptation the Adversary launched at Jesus — who had been fasting forty days — was "*If you are the Son of God (IF you are!), command these stones to become loaves of bread.*" The physical desire for food is innocent enough, especially if a person has been fasting forty days. But in addition, there was an identity issue. At the Jordan Jesus had heard the Voice of God say, "*You are my Son, my beloved.*" But that was only a voice in his head. Now Satan prefaces his temptation by saying, "*If you ARE the Son of God. . .*" insinuating that Jesus might be mistaken. Do you think maybe Jesus would have liked some evidence of his divine identity? "*Make these stones to become loaves of bread.*" Surely, that would be proof! And he also wouldn't be hungry any more.

What could be the downside of the Tempter's proposition? The downside was that agreeing to this apparently innocent suggestion would have focused Jesus one hundred percent on meeting his own *private* needs: the physical need for food and the ego need for status. It would have been all about him, him *alone*. Nothing was in it for others; and nothing was in it for God.

Jesus paused; he pondered; and he remembered the Scriptures that were treasured in his heart. Then he quoted Deuteronomy to the Devil, "*Human beings do not live by bread alone,*" but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Satan's next temptations were also perverse appeals to Jesus' human ego. Number two was a clear invitation to seize worldly power —but, of course, for entirely good ends! It was the temptation to become a czar, a king of kings, a benevolent autocrat: "*To you I will give all these kingdoms, their glory and all this authority; for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I please. If you will only bow down and worship me, Jesus, it will all be yours!*"

We can imagine the Prince of Darkness adding, "Just a quick genuflection to me, Jesus (after all, no one is here to see you do it). Then you'll have power to bring about world peace and enforce perfect justice. Don't you *want* that for the world?! Sure, there's some sacrifice called for —I mean the part about your 'bowing down' to me. But I thought self-sacrifice was part of your 'vocation.' ...No?"

Jesus again pauses, ponders, and remembers before he responds: "*It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'*" —"No thanks, Lucifer; no can do."

The Devil's last temptation is one final appeal to Jesus' human ego: to get him to play to the crowd and create a spectacle that will make his status undeniable. Jesus has been quoting Scripture to the Tempter, and the Tempter wants to show that he has read the Bible too. He goes back to the old "If you ARE the Son of God" gambit, implying that Jesus needs to prove his credentials. *"If you ARE the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

Jesus once more pauses, ponders, and remembers before he answers: *"It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

In the rest of his life, in every test, Jesus will never do anything just for himself, either to meet his merely personal needs, or make himself look important, or to draw attention to his divine status. Instead, he is always pointing, not to himself, but to the Father. In one place he says, *"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work."*

Jesus found the meaning of his life and his ministry in completely submitting his private will to that of his Father. He would accept no glory for himself; he wouldn't even let a sincere admirer call him "good." He said, *"Why do you call ME 'good'? None is good but God alone."*

Jesus was tempted and tested all his life, and so are we. But there's a technique for passing the test, rather than being overcome by the temptation. The technique is simple, and it's a good one to think about during Lent. When you recognize that you're being *tempted* (or *tested*, or *tried*), do what Jesus did: pause, ponder, and remember what Scripture has taught you. The rawest, fleshly appetites and ego needs are basic, common to us mortals. We all share them. Your other desires, though, are what we might label "acquired tastes." Therefore, teach yourself to want, most of all, what the Bible says God wants *for* you.

Putting *God* first isn't easy. In fact, the conflict between what I want and what God wants *for* me is what the old story of Adam and Eve in the Garden is really all about. Putting *me* first comes naturally. Putting God first has to be *learned*. It's "an acquired taste." It has to be a choice we make and then reinforce through a lifetime. It requires pausing to ask ourselves, again and again, "What does God want from me right now?" ...when we discern that a moment of testing is upon us. We can only answer that question after prayerful contemplation of the Gospel.

Nobody can make you cave in to temptation. The Devil can't "make you do it." He can only offer attractive suggestions and interesting propositions. Temptations come only to people who have the power to choose. So when a temptation comes your way, before you make a choice, pause, ponder, remember — and pray. Say: *O my God, I want what you want for me. I want that more than anything else. Help me to love what you command and desire what you promise. I ask this in the name of Jesus your Son, who suffered temptations and gave his life for my freedom. Amen.*