



Temptations and Trials

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Carol Anthony
The First Sunday during Lent ~ February 21, 2010*

Luke 4:1-13

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. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."'

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him."

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 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 answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The season of Lent in the life of the Church gets more attention than most in the liturgical calendar. For those of us who have always been part of a liturgical faith community we know it to be a time of sparse living, giving up things, confession, and a little brow beating for the sake of Christ. For others of us who may have never been a part of a liturgical faith tradition, we know little if anything about the season. In fact, many of us only know the joy of spring as it bursts forth from the long, cold, bleakness of winter and the great delight in celebrating the resurrection of Christ on Easter morning complete with the Easter Bunny and the Easter ham or lamb to follow. Regardless of where the road to Easter begins for us, we find our consciousness being awakened from sleep in these weeks of Lent, readying ourselves for the events that set us apart in the world of religion...the life, death, and rising of Jesus Christ.

This week marks our transition from the Season of Epiphany to the Season of Lent. Epiphany was all about the Incarnation of Christ's as framed by the Magi's visit to the baby Jesus. With Lent our focus moves from incarnation to reflection. Now that we have experienced Jesus' incarnation on earth what should we do with it? The framing image for Lent is Jesus' forty days in the wilderness.

Today's gospel story is a rather dramatic one. John has baptized Jesus and soon after returning from that momentous event at the Jordan River Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness for what appears to be a tortuous mind bending and miserable lack of creature comforts time of temptation and reflection upon his life and relationship with God.

Temptations and trials dominate the story. The devil tempts Jesus to make bread out of stones to relieve his hunger; to free himself from a pinnacle by jumping and relying on angels to break his fall; and to worship the devil in return for all the kingdoms of the world.

It is no wonder that the temptation of Christ has been a frequent subject in art and literature. The imagery is incredibly surreal and difficult to make sense of in life, as I know it. It is a play on power that is hardly comprehensible. Yet the lure of power in our life is an ever-present force. The attraction to do something that may yield negative consequences or to be tested as a temptation can suggest is very real.

Temptations and trials are part of the fabric of our lives. I imagine there is not one of us here today who cannot readily call to mind such a time or event in our life, past or present, when we were beset with temptation and tribulation. Each of us has a personal story or two of such times in our life. And I find that it is often easier to speak from the negative and move toward the positive when sharing my own stories. Temptation as a concept in this context is disconcerting for me because it seems as though it starts from a negative place and dares me to righteous living. It feels like whatever the trial or tribulation before me begins below zero on a scale of 1 to 10 and that I have something to prove. Quite honestly it feels like judgment.

I want to envision the notion this morning that temptations are not necessarily about what is wrong or somehow unacceptable as perhaps that they are about not missing where the Spirit of God is at work in our life. The greatest temptation may be to measure our life against what we don't have over what we have; to measure our life against what's not working over what is working; and to measure our life against where love cannot be found over where love already abides. I wonder if the greatest temptation before us today is to make love less powerful than hate, and abundance less powerful than scarcity. In our worldview, our politics, our daily work, our relationships to one another and most importantly to God and ourselves are we really living our lives from a place of love and abundance? Or do we start from a place of negativity and judgment?

John Mogabgab, the founding editor of *Weavings, A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, recently wrote "To see the world in the transfiguring light of God's grace rather than God in the distorting prisms of the world is the turning for which we must pray daily." But how do we do that? Where do we start? While temptation and how we consider and deal with it is a poignant opportunity for reflection what I find most compelling in the wilderness story this morning is the intentionality with which Jesus, now baptized and full of the Holy Spirit, set out to reflect on who he was and his relationship to God; and in doing so, his willingness to allow himself to be receptive to God, who God was and God's grace.

The chief descriptive words for the season of Lent are intention and reflection. And the journey we take is deeply personal yet deeply communal. Lent calls us to reflect and to look at ourselves both individually and corporately for who we really are. In honesty who are we as a Christian community? Who am I as a person of faith? It is not an easy work to do, but a necessary one if we are going to ready ourselves for Easter. As we look closely at our personal lives, I want to suggest three thoughts we might consider in the process. First, God cannot find us where we think we ought to be, but only where we are. Second, it is what we have been—the less than ideal as well as the ideal—that constitutes our unique story of faith. All of who we are is significant, all of it essential, all of it blessed. And last, we cannot authentically live anyone else's story. We can only live our own.

As a community of faith here at St. Peter's, we will ground our journey in prayer, holy scripture, song, meditation, and sharing in the bread and wine of remembrance coming to the table for both solace and strength; pardon and renewal on Sundays. Rather than the popular concept of giving up something for Lent we can take upon ourselves the intention and the receptivity to God's grace. And we can begin by dispelling the idea that temptation starts with judgment and negativity and accept the challenge to look for God already present in our lives.

We serve a God who starts from love not judgment...*for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...*A God who longs to know us and be known by us in and through love. Through love not in some construed image that the institution of our faith formation may or may not have instilled in us, or that a secular and often cynical world projects onto us, but for who we really are in the fullness of our humanity mixed with the holiness of being held up by God's grace. Like Jesus, we start the journey of Lent full of the Holy Spirit, already loved. Like Jesus in the wilderness, we too are being invited to pay attention in real ways to seeing and recognizing the presence of God's love and grace surrounding us in our lives and the world around us. It is the road we are called to walk as we ready ourselves for the joyous celebration that Easter morning promises.