

WPC
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Temptation
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent, we join Jesus in the wilderness of his temptation. And this year, our first reading begins in the garden of Genesis. Both texts deal with temptation, but whereas Adam and Eve succumb to their temptation, Jesus (who Paul calls the second Adam) remains faithful.

The long version of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness only appears in two of the four gospels: Matthew and Luke. John leaves it out altogether and Mark covers the whole incident in two sentences: "the Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." (Mark 1:12-13) That's it; that's all Mark tells us.

Anyone who remembers more than that is remembering the story as told by Matthew or Luke, because those are the only two who go into any detail about what the devil said and what Jesus said back. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "What this dialog proves among other things is that the devil is biblically literate. He knows exactly where to find the Bible verses he needs

to put Jesus to the test, but Jesus knows more than what the Bible says. Jesus knows how to do what the Bible says, which is how he passes his wilderness exam.” (BBT, Day 1, 2/21/10)

In the wilderness Jesus is tempted to be someone other than who he was meant to be. In rejecting the devil’s temptations, Jesus reveals to the world who he really is: the Savior, the Messiah, the Son of God. He is defined by what he rejects, for the devil’s temptations are for Jesus to deny his true identity.

Last month, I had an opportunity to see the play *The Screwtape Letters*, based upon the book of the same name by C.S. Lewis. It’s a play about an elderly devil, Screwtape, who writes a series of letters giving advice on how to win humans away from God to another devil, his young nephew Wormwood. Here's what Screwtape has to say about the art of temptation:

"You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy [God]. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards

can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts" (Screwtape Letters, p. 56).

The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness by the devil is a familiar story to those of us who have grown up in the church. The book of Hebrews makes it clear that resisting these temptations was not easy for Jesus (4:14 says "For 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/tempted as we are, yet without sin.")

As Fred Craddock notes, "to use the word *tempted* in relation to Jesus is not to state or imply weakness. On the contrary, temptation is a testimony to strength; the greater the strength, the greater the temptation."¹ "All this is to say that a real temptation is an offer not to fall but to rise. The tempter in Eden did not ask, 'Do you wish to be as the devil?' but 'Do you wish to be as God?' We are not tempted to do what we cannot do but what is within our power. The greater the strength, the greater the temptation" (Craddock, Interpretation Commentary, p. 56).

I find it comforting that even Jesus struggled with temptation, just as I do today. I love the miracle stories of Jesus, like when he walks on water or

¹ Fred Craddock, Preaching Through the Christian Year (A), p.153.

raises someone from the dead, but since I can't do those things I don't identify personally with Jesus when I read these stories. But Jesus being tempted? That I can identify with; that's something concrete we have in common.

We face temptation all the time. Oscar Wilde once said, "I can resist anything but temptation." We're tempted to cheat on our taxes, gossip about a friend, lie our way out of trouble...you name it. Often times when we give into temptation we rationalize our actions. A comical, but illustrative, story shows us how adept we can be at this practice: A very overweight man decided that it was time to shed a few pounds. He went on a new diet and took it seriously. He even changed his usual driving route to the office in order to avoid his favorite bakery.

One morning, however, he arrived at the office carrying a large, sugar--coated coffee cake. His office mates roundly chided him, but he only smiled, shrugged his shoulders and said, "What could I do? This is a very special cake. This morning, out of my forced habit, I accidentally drove by my favorite bakery. There in the window were trays of the most delicious goodies. I felt that it was no accident that I happened to pass by, so I prayed, 'Lord, if you really want me to have one of these delicious coffee cakes, let

me find a parking place in front of the bakery.' Sure enough, on the ninth trip around the block, there it was!"²

We're always being tempted to do what we know we shouldn't do. We don't need any instruction about temptation. Temptation we know.

...Or do we?

A Sunday School teacher once told her class, "The best measure of a person is what you would do if you knew no one would ever find out." In other words, when you take away your desire for a reward and your fear of punishment because no one will ever find out, what you do in life grows out of your identity, of who you understand yourself to be.

In that light, our view of temptation may be far too shallow. Ordinarily, we think of temptation as the urge to do something we really would like to do but know we shouldn't do - one more smoke, one more throw of the dice, one more juicy rumor. But, as Tom Long says, "the deepest temptation is not the urge to misbehave, to do what we know we shouldn't do, but rather the enticement to compromise our baptismal identity, to be who we are not called to be." (Long, 20)

² Richard E. Gribble, *Sermons on the Gospel Readings*, Series I, Cycle A.
<http://www.sermonsuite.com/content.php?i=26084&key=l6qk6kmnzezczAUw>

That's the message in this story of Jesus' temptation. The devil is not tempting Jesus to misbehave. The devil is tempting Jesus to ignore his baptism, to deny who he is, to forget that he is the child of his Father in heaven.

It's significant that Jesus comes to the temptation immediately from his baptism, when the skies opened and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." That's who he is. "You are my Beloved Son. You are my anointed one, my suffering servant. You are the one I am sending down the long and painful road to Jerusalem. You are the one I am calling to drink the bitter cup of sacrifice. You are the one I am delivering into the hands of those who will kill you. You are the one I am sending to bear the cross of salvation of all people. You are the one. You are my beloved Son, and I am well-pleased with you." (Tom Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, p. 20)

It is, then, when Jesus' vocation and identity are most clear, that he comes to the wilderness where he is tempted. It's temptation to identity theft, though it doesn't involve any credit cards or Social Security numbers. It's precisely Jesus' identity that the devil seeks to destroy. Notice how the tempter begins, "*If* you are the Son of God..." He could have attacked

directly: "You are not the Son of God," but he was too crafty for that. Much better to generate self-doubt -- "*If* you are the Son of God..."

The devil picks away, then, at Jesus' identity as God's Son, at his baptismal identity. The three temptations - to turn stones into bread, to throw himself down from the top of the temple and to worship the tempter - are not enticements to *do* bad things; they are, at root, invitations to be somebody else, to lay aside his dangerous mission and be someone other than the Savior we need.

So in the wilderness, Jesus is confronted with the question of who he is, and who he is *not*. As one commentator wonders, "Will Jesus be the saving Son on Satan's terms, terms which might be more acceptable to the widest number of people, or on God's terms, and if God's, what will that mean and how will he pull it off? Jesus responds with uncompromising obedience to God's way, and he repels the assaults of the tempter with scripture."³

Jesus' response reminds us what kind of savior we have, and therefore what kind of faith we have. If we're looking to avoid the wilderness altogether, that's not an option. But if we want a saving word that endures like water in the desert, this we can have. We have a "God who loves us

³ Meda A.A. Stamper, *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2011, p. 5.

enough to die for us, to be crucified for us, to become weak and powerless for us.”⁴ That’s the good news of the Gospel, the good news that can carry us through our Lenten journey and beyond. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Jan-March 2011, p. 48.