

March 1, 2020 Wrestling with the Tempter's Power Matthew 4:1-11 Rev. Ross Leckie

I got to thinking this week, when was the first time I heard about Jesus' temptation. Well, it was probably in a Sunday school classroom in the basement of Central United Church. Our teacher, a Mrs. Vanhouganise was a very caring woman who had prepared a special flannel graph board in front of our 6 year old Sunday school class. At the far left of the fuzzy felt landscape was this obviously deranged 'black' devil figure-sort of a cross between a bat and an elf scooping up a loaf of bread from the sand. To his right, an innocent, halo wearing Jesus with elegant robe choosing his side of the road and matching any verbal jibes from this tempter. (something like this 1st scene)

"As you can see," the teacher told us as she pointed to the figure in black, "that bothersome devil never stood a chance against the Lord Jesus. And do you know why? Because, Jesus knew exactly who he was. He knew he was the Almighty Son of God. So the devil couldn't influence him."

I imagine she paused, looking us over as we tugged at our clip-on ties or starched Sunday dresses. "Let me tell you what this story means," she said finally. "It means that as long as we know exactly who we are, as long as we trust in Jesus and believe we're his children, we will always defeat the devil, too! Do you understand?" "Yes," we said, for we wanted to get to the Koolaid and Arrowroot cookies awaiting us at the end of the hour. "We understand."

Those old lessons, they die hard. In that Christian tradition that I recall, Jesus' humanity was something to skirt around, something to affirm in our creeds, for sure, but something we avoided examining very closely. Yes, of course the Incarnation happened. Of course Jesus was tempted in every possible way, so that he could sympathize with our every weakness. But to linger too long over what his enfleshed life might have looked, smelled, tasted, and felt like? To consider that too long, or to consider the possibility that Jesus might have wrestled with who he was and what his mission was about? Well that would be unseemly. It would be---oh, God forbid! ----heretical.

Yet it is precisely the appalling messiness of humanity---both Jesus' and our own---that we grapple with during Lent. We begin on Ash Wednesday, acknowledging with the imposition of ashes that we will surely die, that our bodies will fail us no matter how cleverly we attempt to preserve them with medicine, exercise, cosmetics, or mindfulness.

It is our busyness that we are called away from, to venture out into the wilderness, into our desert like Elijah, like Moses, like the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt. With last Wednesday's ashes on our foreheads and mortality on our minds, we begin the hazardous journey inward, a journey to explore who Jesus is, who we are, and what our shared humanity requires of us now.

This Jesus we encounter does not sound like some of the artists depict him at all. He is described as a 30 year old carpenter who has hardly the strength left to stand, much less tower over the withered landscape. As the writer of Matthew's gospel puts it, this Jesus is "famished" after 40 days of fasting and testing. Physically, he's at the end of his strength. Many of us have trouble missing one meal let alone 40 days of meals.

Have you ever been on a silent retreat, getting in touch with God? Most of us can't keep quiet for an hour, let alone not have contact with a human or a digital screen, or a television for 40 days. Socially, Jesus is alone and friendless. Spiritually, he is struggling to pull together the warm glow of his baptism with this dusty reality of being alone in the wilderness. (show 2nd artist rendition)

Actually, I'd rather be alone out under the stars. But Jesus is caught in close proximity to this evil devil figure. Not a benign fool in red tights, but a sinister exploiter of weakness, with wise and probing questions. "Can you be like God?" was the sly question posed by that serpent to Adam and Eve in that beautiful first garden. "Can you take hold of a higher wisdom, a keener knowledge, a more divine humanity?"

Here, he comes to the exhausted Son of God, with more up to date statements on his lips: "Use your powers for magic to feed you. Turn these stones to loaves of bread." On a high point, Jesus was taken and offered power to have angels at his command in his defense. Or on another vantage over the kingdoms of this world, Jesus was offered all the worldly possessions he desired if he would just give up his soul to the devil.

Now I have to admit that earlier in life, I didn't see what the big deal was with the devil's taunts. Jesus was starving, after all. What would it matter, if he zapped a few stones to become bread? God was supposed to be Jesus' protector too, a commander over the angels. Why would it have been sinful for a son to call on the protective powers of the Father?

Many years have passed since that six-year-old view of my teacher's muscular Jesus. I have come to believe now, as I did not when I was a child, that the Incarnation was not instant. Jesus struggled in to it. Jesus' vocation must have come to him in pieces, throughout those 33 years, not knowing the outcome until the very end. Why else would the devil have targeted his humanity as he did? It was a struggle for Jesus not to give in, just as it is a decision and a struggle for us. So, I am grateful to believe in a God who knows human frailty.

There is still that ache sometimes for that old Jesus on the flannel graph. An ache for his divinity---the certainty of it, the mighty, magical promise of it---to overwhelm his humanity with a bright and reassuring halo. But, then again, embracing Jesus' full humanity has me then, confront my own and also encourages me to know that I have the power to make the right decisions too.

Those 40 days in the wilderness were a time of struggle with purpose and direction, a time for Jesus to decide who he was and how he would live out his calling. He, the Son of God chose deprivation over power. Vulnerability over rescue. Obscurity over honour. At each turn when he could have reached for the certain, the extraordinary, and the miraculous, he reached instead for the precarious, the quiet, and the mundane.

Staple's, the huge office supply chain store, had a while back a commercial out that illustrates the power of the devil's various temptations. In their ad whenever an individual confronts a difficult situation, all they have to do is reach over and push a red, over-sized, glowing button that reads, "easy."

Got to pick up three kids, make dinner, finish that report at work, and be supportive to your spouse?

No problem, just push the big easy button.

Need to do a risky surgery never performed before?

Hey, just push the big easy button.

Faced with the need to balance economic growth and stability with environmental safety and the welfare of worldwide ecosystems?

No problem, just push the big easy button.

Big problem: there are actually no 'easy' buttons. There's no easy button to free us from the trials and tests of the devil. Jesus taught us to pray, not "save us from temptation," but "lead us not into temptation." Jesus' experience in the wilderness with the "tempter" gives us all a snapshot of our own lives. How many times a month, a week, a day, are each of us "tested" in some trivial or profound way? The cashier hands us back too much change. A co-worker is too friendly, too close, too suggestive. Getting ahead means getting around some laws, getting through some loopholes. Somebody wrote something unpleasing on social media, you want to lash back with something nasty.

Jesus' response to the devil was not to push some easy button. But he did push a **reject** and **reset** button. When confronted with the final test, Jesus refused even to dialogue with the devil. His response was complete rejection. No negotiation, only negation: "Away with you, Satan!"

But this dismissal was followed by a powerful positive: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." The REJECT button was followed by a RESET button: rededicate your life to prayer and praise.

When you push the REJECT and RESET button, the devil has no choice but to move on. One of the worst cliches of all history is this one: "The devil made me do it." The devil never makes you do it.

The devil can't make you do it. The devil can't make you sin. You make yourself to sin. You choose sin. The devil can't make you choose it. The devil can't make you do anything.

Here we are on the journey that will culminate a few weeks from now in the great miracle---and the great paradox---of Easter. Jesus' "free gift" to humankind is rooted not in his power but in his sacrifice. This is a scandal the devil can't overcome. After all, in his acts of power---the miraculous healings, exorcisms, mass feedings and bringing back to life, how many people did Jesus save? One hundred? Five thousand? Two thousand? Not even all of Galilee. But in his vulnerability, his restraint, his taking up the cross---how many did he save? He saved the world. Thanks be to God.

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