

Overcoming Temptation

Luke 4:1-13

February 21, 2010

I.

This is a popular time of year for people to take cruises, especially to tropical destinations. I would ask us to think about our Lenten journeys as something like a cruise.

Our ship departed from port on Ash Wednesday when we acknowledged our mortality by affirming that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. And we will make some stops along the way as we worship together and join in our Lenten program here at St. Thomas during the next six weeks.

Then we will return to port on Good Friday and see that the dust of our mortality has given way to the sure and certain hope of God's forgiveness. Finally we will disembark and claim our bags on Easter as we embrace the promise of eternal life given in the resurrection.

Will it be a good cruise? Will we be refreshed and feel closer to God? Perhaps we will look back with fond memories of experiencing something for the first time. Perhaps we will share the blessings of our trip with others after we return.

This way of approaching Lent suggests that while the next six weeks will be a time of introspection and self-examination, it does not have to be a dismal or gloomy experience. Although we will hear a lot about our imperfections, we also can joyfully strengthen our faith by remembering how God in Jesus Christ can guard and protect us from the temptations the world places in our paths.

II.

Today's Gospel reading illuminates the reality of those temptations. It is the classic story of how Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, and how Jesus remained obedient to God's will.

And I believe we should accept that this actually happened. It is not a parable or story placed in the Bible just to make a point. It is repeated in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And since Jesus and Satan were the only people there, the only way we could know about it is if Jesus actually spoke of it later to his disciples. They would not have fabricated a story like this.

It also is helpful to recognize that the essence of this story is temptation, not sin. We will have other opportunities during Lent to talk about sin. And although there is an obvious cause and effect relationship between the two, we can start at the beginning today by looking at the cause, which is temptation.

And right away I have to resist temptation. Some preachers hold this reading up as the standard to which humanity should be held. They say that Jesus resisted temptation and was obedient to God's will. Therefore, they proclaim that we also should be equally able to resist temptation and remain obedient. Very simple. End of story. Just do what Jesus did. Right?

Well, perhaps there's more to it. Temptation is part of life. Volumes have been written about it. And obviously I can't cover it in detail today, but I would like to address two questions. The first is whether Satan's temptation of Jesus is relevant to our lives today. The second is a brief review of the insidious way in which temptation can work.

III.

As we examine the first question, which is how this story applies to us today, we might sense some nagging doubts in the backs of our minds. We might suspect that this dramatic confrontation between Jesus and Satan was unique, and different from our own situations.

After all, we are not sons of God or daughters of God in the way Jesus was the Son of God. We were not blessed at our baptisms with a booming voice from heaven that was well pleased with us. We do not have supernatural powers and cannot perform miracles.

Doesn't it seem that Jesus was special, and had advantages we don't have? He was both divine and human, and could not fail. He was perfect and we are not. We might think he was walking around in the wilderness with an ace in his pocket. Perhaps the fix was in. Satan had no chance. If that's true then why should we think we can resist temptation simply because Jesus did so?

And consider this as well. The Bible tells us Jesus knew he was the Son of God, and he knew he eventually was going to go to heaven and sit at God's right hand. That means he also knew whatever temptations and difficulties he experienced in this world were temporary burdens. This does not minimize the horror of the crucifixion, but Jesus could be confident that God would redeem his suffering.

So, doesn't it seem that everything was destined to work out in the end for Jesus? He knew he would die, but he also knew he would be resurrected.

But what if we look at the other side of the coin? Then we could say of course Jesus had an ace in his pocket. God put it there. And we are in the same position. All of us as Christians carry that same ace because God, through Jesus, also put it there for us. All we have to do is play the card.

What do I mean by that? Well, of course Jesus knew he eventually was going to heaven. Don't we believe the same about ourselves? Don't we know that if we have accepted Jesus Christ as our savior, we also will inherit the Christian promise of eternal life in the presence of our Lord?

And so what if Jesus knew that the temptations and difficulties he was to experience on earth were just temporary burdens? Don't we know the same about ourselves? Don't we also believe that the trials and tribulations of this world will give way to the eternal joy and glory of the next?

Indeed, the fix was in for Jesus, just as the fix is in for us now. That's the point. Jesus' knowledge about his own destiny on earth and in heaven was much like what we know and believe about our own destinies now as Christians.

As a result, we *can* look to Jesus for help through temptation. He *does* set the standard to which we aspire, even though we cannot always live up to it. And he showed us how to resist.

Each response Jesus gave Satan in the wilderness was from the Book of Deuteronomy. We do not live by bread alone (8:3). Worship the Lord only (6:13). Do not test the Lord (6:16). Just as Jesus turned to faith to deliver him from temptation, we are called to do the same.

The Book of Hebrews says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are" (4:15). Jesus knows how Satan tries to separate us from God because he experienced it in the wilderness. And he knows how clever and diabolical Satan can be in placing these temptations before us.

IV.

This leads to the second matter I mentioned. It is the insidious way in which temptation can work in our lives. And I might start with an example of the fellow who gave up donuts for Lent. Later he arrived at the office with a big box of Krispy Kremes, one of them partially eaten.

His co-workers knew of his Lenten plans, and they asked why he stopped for donuts. He said, "I told God that if he wanted me have some donuts, there would be a parking place open right in front of the bakery. And sure enough, on the seventh time around the block, there it was!"

The message of this story illustrates temptation at work. It shows how we can rationalize doing things that are not evil in and of themselves, even though they are not what God wants for us.

In fact, that is what Satan proposed to Jesus. He offered bread, and Jesus was hungry and could have eaten. He would have made Jesus ruler of the world, and Jesus could have solved the world's problems. And he showed how the angels immediately could demonstrate Jesus' power, which would have made Jesus' travels around the countryside unnecessary.

These were not inherently bad things. They were not immoral or violations of Jewish law. But at their core, they were intended to draw Jesus away from obedience to God's will.

This happens today, both in the church and in our lives. Satan attacks the church not to destroy it, but rather to weaken it by turning it away from faithful worship and reliance on Scripture. He does it overtly through division and conflict, and more subtly through tempting the church to function as a secular social organization rather than as the Body of Christ.

We also see it in our lives. Satan does not tempt us with unpleasant things. Rather they come in pretty packages with plausible explanations. They are directed to the things that matter most in our jobs, families, marriages, and our lives. They contain elements of truth wrapped in attractive lies, and are designed to separate us from God.

And we all are susceptible. I am tempted. You are tempted. It happens all the time. Temptations seem to be like the Whack-A-Mole game at the arcade. You beat one down and another pops up.

St. Paul addressed this in First Corinthians when he said, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to everyone" (10:13). And Jesus said in Luke that things that cause us to sin are bound to come (17:1).

These passages are among the pillars of New Testament theology. They recognize that temptation always will be with us. Although we are not perfect like Jesus, we can trust God to show us the way out to escape the power of the enemy.

But what happens when we inevitably trip ourselves up? And it always seems to happen in some way or another, doesn't it? What do we do then? Same thing. God still is faithful. If we acknowledge what we have done, and sincerely ask for strength and guidance to overcome the evil forces that beset us, his promise to show us the way out still is reliable.

V.

Several years ago a religious magazine did a survey on spiritual challenges faced by their readers. It found nine areas, and ranked from the most serious to least serious were materialism, pride, self-centeredness, laziness, anger and bitterness, sexual lust, envy, gluttony, and lying.

And then the survey identified when the readers were most vulnerable. Eighty one percent said that temptations were more potent when they had neglected time with God. Fifty seven percent said that being physically tired made it more difficult to resist temptations.

On the other side of the equation, eighty four percent said that prayer helped in finding a way through temptation. Bible study was mentioned by sixty six percent, and fifty two percent found that being part of an accountability group or relationship was helpful.

The point here is that we cannot contend with Satan directly. He is too strong. But there is no need for us to confront him as Jesus did in the wilderness. We have other options. All we do is simply turn away from the devil and turn toward our Lord and Savior. He's been there. He's done that. He understands, and through the Spirit he can help us be what God calls us to be. *Amen.*