

Temptation is Not a Sin

February 21, 2010

Luke 4:1 – 13

Our scripture reading today comes from the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel, verses 1 – 13. Listen now for the reading of God Word for the people of God.

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

³The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

⁴Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'"

⁵The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷So if you worship me, it will all be yours."

⁸Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

⁹The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰For it is written:

" He will command his angels concerning you
to guard you carefully;

¹¹they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

¹²Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

¹³When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

This is the Word of God and It can be trusted. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness; give us grace to direct our lives in obedience to your Spirit; and as you know our weakness so may we know your power to save. Speak to us now in the meditations of hearts and in the words of my lips that we may come to know more about Your Will and Your Way for our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who is alive with you and the Holy Spirit; one God now and forever. Amen

Prior to today's reading, the scriptures tell us that Jesus had just come from being baptized by John in the River Jordan. How wonderful it must have been for Jesus to have experienced such an event as this while all those present must have looked on in wonder. The very heavens opened at the time of his baptism and there for all to see were present together the very elements that comprise our doctrinal understanding of the Holy Trinity; the Father – announcing his pleasure at the sight of His Son's fulfillment of righteousness, the Son – publically affirming his call to ministry and the Holy Spirit – descending like a dove; serving as a conduit connecting the Father once again with the Son. If ever there was a time to feel like you were on top of the world, able to accomplish anything and to feel full of power and prestige; now would have been that time for Jesus. It isn't everyday that God announces verbally His pleasure in what he observes going on in the life of His one and only Son; much less in the lives of any of us here today. How could anyone deny Jesus as the Christ following such an affirmation? Surely Jesus' authority and his very reputation were certainly to precede him now wherever he would go. But alas, Jesus was not given very much time to bask in this moment before he was lead away by the Spirit into the desert. After all, there was much work to be done.

In education we are often given an opportunity at the beginning of each semester to introduce ourselves to our new students; a brief moment to impress them or at least convince them that we are qualified and competent enough to stand before them with the authority that has been given to us. I often give them a brief overview of my qualifications:

I graduated from High School in 1991 . . . I have an A.S. Mathematics from Gainesville College, I have a B.S. in Education from Georgia Southern University, I have an M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Southern Mississippi and I have an Ed. S. in Education from the University of Georgia . . . blah, blah, blah!

Even still, many are not convinced or even impressed because it is the same spill they probably get from every other teacher that they have had every semester up until this point in their career. It is like I mentioned last Sunday evening at the Lighthouse Ministries when I stated that students, like most everyone we encounter in our lives, don't care how much we know until they know how much we care or at a minimum that we can back up the claims that we have made or the claims that others have made about us. I see the same sort of

message reflected in our reading today. The work that Christ had been put in charge of was something big, something revolutionary; something far greater than anyone present at his baptism could have truly appreciated or understood at the time. In order to carry out his call – his ministry – effectively there would have to be a time of intense preparation and there was no time to waste.

Prior to his being led into the desert, the role of the Holy Spirit served primarily to affirm Christ's call not to those around him as much as it did to affirm that call to Jesus himself. Now, the Holy Spirit, having come into union with Jesus (we are told that Jesus was *full* of the Holy Spirit) leads Jesus into the desert. It is interesting to note that this sort of leading was not a simple suggestion or gentle nudge. Mark's gospel tells us that "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness" suggesting that Jesus was led by a more compulsory notion. Jesus had been baptized and filled with the Spirit; now he *must* go into the desert. (Dr. Ralph F. Wilson)

So how does this action speak to us and what does it have to do with our ministry today; our call to bring the love of God into a lost and dying world or more intrinsically, how does it speak to the need for us to recognize the need for God's love to be brought into our own lives – the everyday lives of our existence outside of the four walls of the church house? Simply stated, we must recognize that the attention placed on ourselves pales in comparison to our need to self-sacrifice, discern and prepare for the mission that God has given each of us.

It doesn't matter how much schooling I have accomplished or how many degrees I have obtained, unless I am willing to use that for the better of others . . . not for myself. If the statement, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" carries any weight at all, then we must come to understand exactly what it is that shows others just how much we care. Most easily accomplished, this is done by placing the attention off of ourselves and redirecting our focus and attention on the needs of those around us. The work that Jesus had been placed in charge of was indeed a great one and knowing the stories of Jesus eventual ministry as we do, we also know that the opportunity to get caught up in the moment and to set aside the mission he was placed in charge of would be equally as great. Jesus needed time to prepare and so he was

lead into the desert; away from the luxuries of the city; away from his family and friends; away from all that he had come to know and was taken into isolation with the sole purpose of reflection, meditation and purposeful preparation for what was to lie ahead – the mission of his ministry and call.

So this morning we find ourselves not like Christ, but rather accompanying Christ on his journey of preparation for his ministry as Jesus in turn accompanies us in a time of soul-searching and repentance as we enter into the Season of Lent. By observing the forty days of Lent, we imitate Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days. It allows for us a time of preparation through prayer, penitence and self-denial for the Easter Season – which for Christ served as the pinnacle of his mission and accomplished ministry and for us serves as the pinnacle of our journey and accomplished discernment into God's Will and Way for each of our lives.

For many of us the ability to remove ourselves from the complete luxuries of the world in which we live or the responsibilities the world has placed us in charge of is unlikely possible. So, we reflect on Jesus' experiences all the while denying ourselves of what luxuries we can live without, such as chocolate, soft drinks, debit cards or maybe our time. The idea behind such sacrifice is to offer us a constant reminder of the sorrow and sin in our own lives and to offer us a time of penitence for all that we carry with us that keeps us from fully being in tune with God; much like our time of Silent and Corporate Confession of Sin each week prior to Holy Communion; only on a much larger and consistent scale. More importantly, I believe that the Season of Lent is a time to reflect on our temptations and our response to those temptations in our lives.

Penitence is great, but Jesus had no need to feel sorrowful for the sins of his life – he had no sin. Rather, we, like Christ, are offered during the Season of Lent a time to reflect on our own lives; where we have come from, where we are going and becoming aware that the battles and temptations in our lives are more than just human frailty, but rather they are an affirmation of God's call on our lives and how we respond to these temptations says much to who we are, where we are in our walk and what we are accomplishing in our lives.

It should not surprise us that Jesus was tempted, however, for some the very idea is a conundrum. After all, the author of the book of James tells us that “God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does God tempt anyone.”

(1:13) Even though Jesus is 100% God he is also, through his incarnation, 100% man and so Jesus is able to experience all that we ourselves are able to experience. This must include temptation. It is important to note here, however, that Jesus has no extraordinary abilities or weapons in facing his temptations apart from the same weapons that we have available to us today and those are the Spirit of God and the Word of God.

Being tempted can sometimes make us feel shameful. That is, being tempted can make us feel dirty. I like to call this false penitence. The spontaneous thoughts of hatred or lust or envy or theft shock us and so we immediately begin to beg for forgiveness. An important lesson for us this morning is this: temptation is not sin. We may be tempted by evil thoughts that enter into our minds but we have the ability, the authority and the power through the Holy Spirit to push them right back out again. It is as Martin Luther once said, “You can’t help it if a bird flies over your head, but you don’t need to let him make a nest in your hair.” Temptation is not a sin.

So what do we do when temptation comes our way? One of my favorite advices I have ever heard concerning dealing with temptation came from Dr. Charles Stanley. Dr. Stanley says, “When you are faced with temptation . . . run! Turn around, go in the opposite direction and you run, run, run until you are far away from the source of that temptation?” Of course, Jesus didn’t run. But I have to say Dr. Stanley’s advice is still great advice. If you do not feel equipped to deal with the temptation that has been placed before you, then take Dr. Stanley’s advice – run!

Aside from running, what else can we do? From our scripture reading today we are told that we can find comfort and strength of the Holy Spirit and we can stand firm on the Word of God. In each of the three accounts of Jesus’ temptation offered in Luke’s gospel this morning, we find that Jesus’ confronts the temptations of Satan head on; void of argument, void of discussion; but rather head on with the truth and power of God’s Word.

In the first account, Satan plays on Jesus’ pride and hunger, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’” (Deuteronomy 8:3). In the second account, Satan offers Jesus power and wealth over all the kingdoms of the world. We read this in verses

5 – 7, “The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been give to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.” Again, Jesus responds with the Word of God, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” (Deuteronomy 6:13)

Alas, the third account tells us that Satan offers Christ an opportunity to prove himself to him. Satan even goes as far as using God’s own Word to tempt Christ, “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written says Satan: “He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will life you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” (Psalm 91:11, 12) Can you believe that Satan actually used the Word of God against God’s own Son? It is scary to think that God’s Word can be thrown about so dangerously. Of course, the modern society knows nothing about that; right? Certainly in today’s world we do not find the Word of God being used so irresponsibly, do we?

Well if the Word of God has so much power to it, why didn’t it work for Satan? Why? Because the power of God’s Word is more than just words, it is the faith, intent and authority with which the word is wielded with that generates power and that faith, intent and authority comes through relationship. For us that relationship is described in our relationship with God our Creator, Jesus Christ our Redeemer and the Holy Spirit our Sustainer. For Jesus, that relationship is recognized in the realization that he was filled with the Holy Spirit and so Jesus responds with, “[The Word also] says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Deuteronomy 6:16)

The scripture tells us that Satan left without accomplishing what he had set out to do and so it can be the same for each of us. When you are tempted, do not lament your failings, rather stand firm on the Word of God and know that Satan has no power over God or over God’s children.

This morning as we begin our Lenten journey together, I encourage you to find comfort in the promise of God’s love and renewal in the radically inclusive message of God’s love. Likewise, I encourage you to take time during this Season of Lent to look deep within yourselves. What is it that you are holding onto that God is

asking you to let go of? Temptation is not a sin; acting improperly in response to that temptation; that is another story. God has called some of us out of sexually impurity; alcoholism, drug addiction and hatred while others of us are continuing to seek deliverance from these and other temptations. Please know today that we cannot be delivered on our own. We must trust in God, seek his presence in our lives, discern his call on our lives and surrender ourselves totally.

During our sermon hymn this morning please know that this altar is open for all who are seeking a fresh start, a new day and a new beginning. This week I had an opportunity to hear a woman in her eighties give her testimony as to how she came to be in relationship with Christ. I won't go into a lot of detail, but I do want to share with you the one part of her testimony that really struck home for me. She stated that she had always been a good person and didn't have any concept that she was a sinner and was in need of God's love because she had always compared her nature to the nature of others. Because she did not see her life in as big a mess, if you will, as those around her, she did not believe she was a sinner. It wasn't until she stopped and compared her nature to that of Christ that she saw for the first time that she had been making the wrong comparison.

Christ was 100% human and had the ability to fail as miserably as each one of us here today has. The difference is that Christ didn't fail and when we compare ourselves to Christ, we certainly can begin to see that no matter how good we may feel we are or how blameless we may believe ourselves to be; we are each sinners and in need of forgiveness, relationship and reconciliation.

In the name of the One who is Lord over all. Amen!