

Sermon 022115 Temptation
Scripture Luke 4: 1-13
Sermon Title- The Road Not Taken

I want to be clear about a few perspectives that I hold because they are raised in today's gospel and my sermon. I have said before that I do not read the Bible literally. I believe that the Bible means more than it says. For example, although the word 'Father' is used to describe God, I not to think of God as a male human with offspring. The term 'Father' reduces God and God cannot be reduced. Yet, we use the term 'Father' regularly because it gives us a way to conceive of God even though God is inconceivable. I'm not against the word 'Father' in reference to God, but I always want to caution that God is far beyond the scope of that word.

Today's famous story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness involves the devil. When I think of the devil, I can't help but to think of the little red lizard man with a tail and pitchfork on the cans of deviled ham. The Bible personifies the devil the same way the Bible personifies God. The personified devil represents evil and temptation to do evil. In my view, by reducing evil to a person-like devil, it makes evil and temptation far less frightening than they actually are. Like 'Father' for God, 'devil' for evil makes it more manageable to talk about but let us never forget how large, strong, clever, and persistent evil really is.

There is one more thing on this reduction topic. This is not the Bible but an American modern times topic. The most common usage of the word ‘temptation’ that I hear personally involves food. People reduce temptation to cravings for things like chocolate or french fries. Temptation is far greater and more complex than cravings for tasty food. Today we speak of real temptation, not chocolate temptation. Okay thanks, now I’ve got that off my chest, let’s get to the story.

Jesus has just been baptized by John and is “full of the Holy Spirit.” (4: 1) The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. During this time, he undergoes three temptations from the devil. It is always interesting to see how the Bible uses numbers. Forty and three keep cropping up. Moses and the Israelites were in the desert for 40 years, Jesus for 40 days. Three temptations; then Easter falls on the third day after the Crucifixion. These are just a few of numerous examples.

Anyway, Jesus is in the desert or in many translations ‘the wilderness’ and is tempted by the devil. This account has both the devil and Jesus using Bible quotes in their debate. Now, there is an important point to be made here. The devil is not tempting Jesus to sin in the passage. The word sin does not appear in the wilderness story. Think about it. This is Jesus. Nobody is going to talk him into murder, or theft, or coveting. This is the

cleverness of the devil, or evil. The choices in life are not always between right and wrong, or good and bad. The temptations for Jesus in the wilderness were less stark and more subtle... and they often are for us, too.

The first temptation is for Jesus to turn a stone into bread. Jesus is on a 40 day fast; we are not talking stomach growling hungry for supper. This is muscle tissue being consumed to stay alive- survival hunger. Plus, if Jesus can turn one stone into bread he could turn many stones into bread; he could use that power to feed his people. He can also do this to prove that he is the Son of God. It is an attractive option. Yet Jesus has a higher calling. He is about God's work in the world so responds; "One does not live by bread alone." The temptation was between what appears to be a good choice and a better choice. Temptation is subtle and clever. Jesus did not take the easier route, but the God route.

The second temptation on the surface looks more clear-cut. The devil is portrayed as the ruler of the world (not a stretch, even in this day). The devil wants Jesus to worship him. If Jesus worships the devil, the devil will give Jesus power over all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus lived under the heavy-handed control (to say the least) of the Roman Empire. Surely a 'regime change' with Jesus as the head could only have done the world good. Yet again, Jesus says no. The price was too high. For Jesus

to say yes to the world and therefore the devil, he would have to say no to God, to the way of God, and to the kingdom of God. Again, the temptation is for an attractive option that could have done some good, but Jesus took the better path, the way of God.

The third and final temptation is as fully ingenious as the others. The devil wants Jesus to prove he is the Son of God by jumping off the temple, using scripture again where it is written in Psalm 91 that God would send angels to catch the holy. This is a temptation for Jesus to once and for all establish his identity and to prove his faith. The whole world would bend its knees in worship of Jesus forevermore. This is a tempting opportunity for Jesus who came to save us. Again, Jesus chooses God by quoting Deuteronomy, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” (6: 16) After the third temptation, the devil retreats until the ‘opportune time.’

The three temptations of Jesus are about survival, power, and identity, which are all centers of human weakness and temptation. We humans are so often focused on these and are tempted to do whatever it takes to acquire and preserve survival, power and identity. Jesus refused to turn the stone to bread, yet went on to feed the hungry. He refused political power yet became the world’s great spiritual power. He refused to jump off the temple to see if God would save him, yet went up on the cross with full

confidence that God's will for eternal life would triumph over the world's decision to execute him. Game, set, and match for Jesus.

How about us? Remember that the devil receded to wait for the 'opportune time.' Well, the opportune time has come with us. The opportune time for the devil has come. Remember that in life, the choices are often not clear-cut. As Jesus showed us in the wilderness, choices are often between good, better, and best or bad, worse, and worst. The temptation comes often when the decision is between what might be easier or more personally profitable. The temptation might come when the desire is there to rationalize a more attractive choice by pointing to the fact that there is virtue in the more attractive choice when it is still not the best choice. So often, when in the heat of life's battles, choices are not clear-cut and we look for the path of least resistance and find quick justification for our actions. It is in those moments that temptation is the strongest.

The road of life sometimes comes to a T. Your choices are dramatic and clear-cut...right or wrong, good or bad, faithfulness or sin. Of course, there is temptation in those moments. I'm guessing here, but I doubt if most of us spend much time tempted to murder or robbery. Sometimes your choice is far subtler, more like a fork in the road with what appears to be slight differences at the time. But the decision is no smaller and has no less impact

upon the rest of your life. The temptation might be to take the easier, more popular, or more profitable path.

This brings to mind the short but powerful poem from Robert Frost:

The Road Not Taken

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent to the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as far as the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both equally in that morning lay
In leaves no step had trodden back.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

It does make all the difference. Life is full of grey area through which we are called negotiate. Which is the higher call?

The business leader tries to keep people in their jobs but is faced with possibly using that capital to meet new anti-pollution standards. Which is the higher call? An adult child must decide on whether or not to approve a medical procedure that might extend an elderly parent's life but there are doubts if it will be a quality life? Which is the higher call? A parent must give permission for a child to play a sport in which there is physical risk and potential danger or say no to keep them safe but possibly result in the child becoming physically timid. Which is the higher call? Life is complicated. Temptations come when we are faced with decisions that might make things easier for us or nicer or safer in the short term but do not result in the greatest good.

So how do we approach these thorny ethical decisions and the ever-present temptations? Jesus' choice was to be obedient to God. The wilderness story of Jesus offers us an example to follow. Jesus allowed himself to be led by the Spirit, and so too can we. Jesus constantly remembered God's purpose in life and the call to worship and follow God.

Christian ethics do not come pre-packaged with all clear answers. The Bible gives us no detailed roadmap or GPS to follow in our 21st century struggles and challenges. What it provides us with is a compass. If we keep pointed toward 'true north', if we ask ourselves how we might best serve God in each decision, we

will find our way, and temptations will be bypassed. A prayer before each decision and the right way will likely come clear. And that will make all the difference. AMEN