

## “The Biggest Temptation of All”

Luke 4:1-13

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Lent is the time when we prepare ourselves to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from death. So why do we begin by thinking about temptations? Perhaps it's because temptations arise in every area of life, even for the most faithful, even for the Son of God.

Hearing today's scripture passage, we realize the devil tempts Jesus not to do bad things but to do things that have good results. If he turns the stones into bread, he can feed the hungry people in the whole world. If he gives his allegiance to the devil, the whole world will belong to Jesus in an instant (even though it's not really the devil's to give, I have to add.) If he jumps from the temple pinnacle, God will perform a flashy miracle which will demonstrate to the whole world who Jesus really is.

Three separate temptations to do good things and Jesus resists them all. There seems to be a common theme through all three temptations. That is the temptation to change his ministry ever so slightly so that it is his purpose, not God's, that he lives out. The temptation to not be true to who he is in relationship to God. Not being true to who we are in relationship to God is a temptation Christians face as well.

Lent is said to be a time to examine our lives and our relationship with God. I have said that. One temptation for Christians, especially during the season of Lent, is to begin with ourselves. To begin a self-examination of our lives determining what sin we need to confess, what area or areas most needs improvement, —practicing forgiveness or giving up gossip---figuring out what we need do to improve ourselves in the eyes of God. But putting the emphasis on facing one's temptations and vowing to do a better job resisting them, or taking up one's cross – (even though those are good things) makes the focus of Lent much more personal and private than it ought to be. Discipleship as self-improvement does not resemble the way of the cross. Still wet from his baptism, Jesus is “led by the Spirit in the wilderness” this passage tells us. (Luke 4:1) It is Jesus' series of temptations, his journey to the cross that Lent would have us pay attention to. Each time Jesus is tempted with

power in the wilderness and refuses, it reveals what is behind our desire for power, our need for security and affirmation: fear. The root of all sin, Herbert McCabe, has said is “the very deep fear that we are nothing.”

Because of that fear, we often want a Lenten “experience” that will make us worthy of the love we are sure we do not deserve, that will “shape us up” in the eyes of God. And it is fear that deceives us into thinking the work of transformation is up to us. What spiritual discipline or book or program will fix me?

Lent invites us to give up the illusion that we are in control--- that discipleship is a do-it-yourself project for the not-quite-good-enough. But to confess our sin during Lent, or anytime, is not to plead for forgiveness from God. Rather, as McCabe reminds us, it is to thank God for it. “When God forgives our sins, God is not changing God’s mind about us. God is changing *our* minds about God. God does not change; God’s mind is never anything but loving; God IS love.” And Jesus Christ loves us so much that he went to the cross for our sins, out of love for you and me and the whole world.

Remember the first time you knew, really knew, that God loved you?

Anne Lamott, describes an experience of knowing God loved her in her book, Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith (p.41-43.)

*Then one afternoon in my dark bedroom, the cracks webbed all the way through me, I believed that I would die soon, from a fall or an overdose. I knew there was an afterlife but felt that the odds of my living long enough to get into heaven were almost nil. They couldn’t possibly take you in the shape I was in. I could no longer imagine how God loved me. But in my dark bedroom, out of nowhere it crossed my mind to call the new guy at St. Stephen’s.*

*So I did. He was there, and I started to explain that I was losing my mind, but he interrupted to say with real anguish that he was sorry but he had to leave. He literally begged me to call back in the morning, but I couldn’t form any words in reply. It was like in the movies when the gangster is blowing bubbles through the bullet hole in his neck. There was this profound silence, except for my bubbling. Then he said, “Listen. Never mind. I’ll wait. Come on in.”*

*It took me forty-five minutes to walk there, but this skinny middle-aged guy was still in his office when I arrived. My first impression was that he was smart and profoundly tenderhearted. My*

*next was that he was really listening, that he could hear what I was saying, and so I let it all tumble out---the X-rated motels, my father's death, a hint that maybe every so often I drank too much.*

*I don't remember much of his response, except that when I said I didn't think God could love me, he said, "God has to love you. That's God's job" . . .*

*. . . He was about the first Christian I ever met whom I could stand to be in the same room with. Most Christians seemed almost hostile in their belief that they were saved and you weren't. Bill said it bothered him too, but you had to listen to what was underneath their words. What did it mean to be saved, I asked, although I knew the word smacked of Elmer Gantry for both of us?*

*"You don't need to think about this," he said.*

*"Just tell me."*

*"I guess it's like discovering you're on the shelf of a pawnshop, dusty and forgotten and maybe not worth very much. But Jesus comes in and tells the pawnbroker, 'I'll take her place on the shelf. Let her go outside again.'"*

"For God so loved the world that God sent the Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16,17)

Isn't our biggest temptation thinking we have to do something to earn God's forgiveness and love?

May we, led by the Holy Spirit as Jesus was, successfully resist that temptation now and forever more. Amen.

