

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent

Grace Church, Broadway

March 10, 2019

Our Lent begins as always with one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' Temptations in the Wilderness. Luke's version which we heard this morning is the most comprehensive. But before we get to the temptation narrative it is worth noting the context in which it appears in Luke. One of the problems of mainly hearing our scripture in liturgical settings is that we lose a sense of where the particular passage stands, with what goes before and what follows. Which only highlights the importance of the good old Lenten discipline of reading scripture on a regular basis. So what goes before Luke's account of the Temptations in the Wilderness? In fact Luke places the Genealogy of Jesus, perhaps the most unread passage of scripture in the New Testament, immediately before the Temptations. "Jesus was the son of Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat" and so forth. You may remember that in the KJV the Matthew genealogy uses the word "begat", "Abraham begat Isaac and Isaac begat Jacob" and so on. I always remember the English comedy duo, Flanders and Swann, saying "there was an awful lot of begatting in the Old Testament". Rather than beginning with Abraham and finishing with Jesus as in Matthew, Luke reverses the order beginning with Jesus and working backwards finishing with Jesus, "son of Adam, son of God". What Luke is saying is that this Jesus is both truly human and truly divine, "son of Adam, son of God". And to demonstrate this belief Luke then launches straight into the Temptations of Jesus to remind us that as "son of Adam" Jesus was himself tested in every way as we are being tested. (Hebrews 2: 14-18). In other words this Jesus, who is "son of Adam" shares our human condition with all its testings and temptations and helps us by his example. But as "son of God" he did so "without sin".

I am not sure if many of you saw the rather dark film, "First Reformed", starring Ethan Hawke as the young Reformed pastor in upstate New York, set in contemporary times, which was released last year. I would not recommend you rush out to see it on Netflix or wherever. I described the film to a friend as being in the "slit your wrists" category. It made me so depressed when I saw it that I went

home and poured myself a stiff drink. That being said however it is a very powerful film and finely acted by Ethan Hawke so much so that I have gone on thinking about it. Indeed it immediately came to mind as I began to prepare for this sermon. Because while it is specifically about the temptations faced by a not very successful pastor struggling to keep himself and his church afloat, ultimately it is about the temptations and testings of our faith that we all face as part of our human condition. In the film the pastor, whose marriage has failed, is lonely and needful. An attractive, but mildly disturbed woman, a faithful parishioner comes to share her concerns about her husband who is risking his life in pursuit of a serious local environmental issue. The local lake is being poisoned by run off from a chemical plant nearby so that fish are dying and there is evidence of abnormal degrees of illness in the surrounding population. The immediate tests for the pastor are his relationship with the woman and whether he should get involved with the environmental issue. But there are even more complexities. The pastor's friend and supporter is a local African-American Pentecostalist pastor who runs a successful big church down the street. He comes across as a really good guy, friendly, supportive and encouraging to his ministerial friend and neighbor and goes the extra mile in offering to help the Reformed pastor organize the 250th Anniversary of the First Reformed Church. While happy to receive this assistance from his friend, it comes to his attention that the main funding supporting the big church and his anniversary celebrations comes from the owners of the chemical plant. The film ends very dramatically but without any real resolution to the dilemmas the pastor faces. But it certainly highlights the complexity of the temptations and tests of faith that we all face in daily and professional life. There is a good example of complex and testing issues playing out in Canadian politics at present.

So Luke places Jesus' Temptations in the Wilderness in the broader context of the testings and temptations we all face as part of being human. I use both terms, temptations and testings, deliberately, because the word "temptation" has been narrowed down in popular English, but also because the Greek uses both terms in the passage.

But even before we get to Jesus' actual temptations note carefully the words introducing the narrative: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan (where he had been baptized) and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil."

Whatever we make of the temptations of Jesus, they are the initiative of the Spirit. Faith, like love and hope, need to be tested to ensure that they are genuine. We are all pretty good at saying that we love everybody; that we are welcoming to all who come to Grace for instance; that we are not racist, anti-Semitic, or homophobic; that we are not violent or arrogant or rude. But then we are faced with an actual situation which truly puts us to the test. Sometimes to our dismay we fail badly, perhaps almost inadvertently slipping back into tired old caricatures, or using outdated language or phrases, like Congresswoman Omar from Minnesota, and are disappointed with ourselves. Or faced with illness or loss to ourselves or in our family or among our close friends we find ourselves accusing God of failing us. Tests to our faith as to our love come in all shapes and sizes. But it is precisely at such times of testing that we need to identify with Jesus “who was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4: 15). We are not alone in our temptations and testings; Jesus, our Savior, has been there before, and given us an example to strengthen and encourage us to keep going, to continue as faithful disciples of the one who calls us to himself.

And all this took place in “the wilderness” for 40 days. For Luke there is a clear identification in this whole passage with the testing of the children of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai as they journeyed from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land over 40 years. The Israelites were put to the test again and again, over issues of water, food, faithfulness and obedience, and failed each time. By contrast, Jesus, the leader of the new Israel, passed these tests with flying colors, encouraging us who follow him to continue in his way.

Each of the three temptations which follow suggest a compromise that would not only make the mission less burdensome but would seem appropriate in view of the special status above all other human beings that Jesus as son of God enjoyed. “After all I am the CEO; surely I deserve just a few perks appropriate to the office; after all I work so hard and carry the burden of the organization”. We could translate that thought into many scenarios. Another thing about the temptations in general is that they are subtle. Like all temptations to which the virtuous are vulnerable, they come under the guise of good. Not to give Prime Minister Trudeau a hard time but because it is current news, he defends the actions of which he is accused by saying he did it to save jobs for Canadians. Not a bad thing for a government to do in principle. But at what price? He is accused of covering up

illegal actions by the company involved and ordering his Justice Minister to turn a blind eye. Temptations are subtle and complex!

The first temptation, turning stones into bread, makes sense in light of Jesus being famished from fasting for 40 days. Also in principle it would be a great way of feeding a hungry world. You can almost hear the devil whispering in his ear: “lighten up Jesus; just look after yourself this one time”. Jesus’ sharp response, quoting Hebrew scripture, “One does not live by bread alone”, shows his clear determination to place his powers solely at the service of others and not use them for selfish ends. Not that Jesus did not care for the hungry. When he saw the hungry crowd by the Sea of Galilee he told his disciples, “give them bread that they may eat”, which in turn led to the miraculous feeding of the 5000.

The second temptation, the offer of all the kingdoms of the world in return for worshipping the devil. Given conventional Messianic expectation of the time this was not an inappropriate ambition for the messianic son of God. Eventually Jesus will be “Lord of all” when he is risen, ascended and glorified. However he will receive that title not from the devil but having followed the path of humble service, having trod the way of the cross, and he will receive it from the Father, whose it is to grant. The devil’s offer in a sense preserves the status quo of conventional messianic expectation. But the way Jesus chooses, in obedience to the Father, is the more difficult path which will involve conflict with powerful entrenched forces. The authority it exercises will be one that serves rather than dominates. If God alone is to be worshiped and all humanity made to feel at home in God’s house, then this alone, the path of humble service, is the chosen path. “Worship the Lord you God, and serve only him.” Obedience to the Father is the only way.

The third temptation, forcing God to act by throwing himself off the Temple. To emerge from such a “stunt” would most effectively launch Jesus’ messianic career. For Jesus such feats amount to putting God to the test, the very fault which the children of Israel indulged in during their desert wanderings, a fault Jesus was attempting to reverse. The power that Jesus already had would be used in his ministry to heal the sick and cast out demons, bringing with it life and hope, but certainly not for cheap and showy stunts! It is worth noting that the devil even quotes scripture in his temptation, verses from Psalm 91. Scripture itself can be

cleverly misused. Once again Jesus responds carefully quoting from Deuteronomy, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”. It reminds us that we need to know our Bibles so that we can be ready to defend and withstand the wiles of the tempter!

The passage concludes: “when the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” Jesus would be put to the test again, both in Gethsemane and on Calvary. And once again as Jesus experienced the extremities of human suffering and death he will say “not my will but thine be done” and “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” As Son of Adam and Son of God Jesus faithfully and obediently treads the path of divine love, of humble and self-giving service, the path that ultimately leads to resurrection and glorification.

What do we learn from all this with regard to “keeping a good Lent”? First of all I trust we take heart from the fact that Jesus like us has experienced the tests and temptations that we face as part of our human condition. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4: 15).

But secondly make this Lent an opportunity for growth in our love of God, in our love for each other, in our commitment to the way of Jesus. The traditional language uses the term “Lenten disciplines”. Not a bad term in itself, so long as we see disciplines as ways of deepening our discipleship of Jesus. Some interpret the term negatively, that is all about the things we can’t do or must give up, beating ourselves up as it were. What are you giving up for Lent this year? is a question we often ask each other at this time of the year. I can well remember our family’s mild amusement at our old grandmother giving up sugar in her tea during Lent. My mother would say “I don’t know why she does not give it up altogether.” But then only last week talking to one of my brothers in Australia I discovered that this same grandmother said the daily office, that is, morning and evening prayer, all her adult life. I never knew that and was deeply moved to discover it. But the point I want to make is that my grandmother’s giving up sugar in her tea was not some facile, utilitarian act, but rather the sign of a much deeper spirituality. I suspect for her the little Lenten discipline was a daily reminder of Jesus and his Passion, the way of Love. Whatever we give up or take on this Lent let it be something that points us to Jesus making us better disciples as a result.

Thirdly use the resources you already have at your disposal more effectively this Lent. Scripture, liturgy, prayer and service immediately come to mind. This might include recommitting yourself to regular Bible reading and study; making every effort to join in common worship on Sundays or weekdays; allowing time for quiet and prayer; and finding opportunities for service to others either by assisting in established programs or reaching out to those you know who are aged, lonely or unwell.

I trust this Lent will be for all of us a time when we walk more closely with Jesus in his Way of Love, a Way which will lead through Holy Week to the joys of Easter and beyond.

George Herbert began his poem, "Lent", "Welcome dear feast of Lent".

In that spirit I wish you all a good Lent. Amen