

Lent I C
Luke 4:1-13
February 21, 2010

Temptation. Now there's a word you don't hear too often. Except in advertisements, when what they want you to do is to YIELD to that temptation.

But on this first Sunday of Lent, we are confronted again, as we are every year on this same day, with the question of temptation. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, gets up out of the Jordan River, where he was just baptized, and that same Holy Spirit leads him into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by the devil.

He doesn't go into the wilderness to commune with God. He doesn't go to hang on to all those lovely, warm, comfy feelings he must have felt when that voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." No, Jesus goes to the wilderness to be tested.

And, we must assume, he also goes TO TEST. To test his identity as God's Beloved Son. To test his vocation as the Messiah of God. To see if he can measure up. To see if he is really ready to answer God's call.

To be tempted, at least in Biblical Greek, is also to be tested. The Greek word *peirao* that Luke uses here means both. Tempt. Test. It is as if Jesus were going to go take his LSAT or sit for his medical boards. This is a real test, and how he comes out of it on the other side will determine everything.

And we have to assume here that yes ... this is a real test, that the full humanity of Jesus is in play, and that he has the same free will that any of us have. Free to choose one path or the other, to yield to temptation or to prevail over it.

These are also real temptations that the devil sets before him. These are not the dinky little temptations you and I will experience over the course of this Lent ... to forget and eat a cookie, or to let slip that very, very bad word that we had PROMISED not to say, or to blow off that trip to the gym, or to neglect that wonderful, spiritual book sitting by the bedside.

No, these are real temptations. After all, the devil does not come to Jesus in the wilderness and say, “Jesus, look! I’ve got CHOCOLATE!” No, the devil gets him right where he lives – in his identity and in his mission. Jesus is going to be the Messiah, well what kind of Messiah is he going to be?

Test One: Will he be the Messiah of the quick fix, feeding the hungry by zapping stones into bread? Can’t you hear the devil remind him: “There are so many hungry people, Jesus. Wouldn’t it be a mitzvah, Jesus, a good deed, Jesus, to feed yourself and everyone? Why kill yourself trying to teach these little humans how to feed one another? You can be the hero by feeding them all.”

Test Two: Will he be the Messiah of earthly power, the sort of Messiah the Jewish people are looking for? Will he kick out the Romans, and restore the nation of Israel? Will he wield his power the old-fashioned way, with laws and courts and taxes and armies? Will he be a take-no-prisoners king like his ancestor David?

Test Three: Or will he – and here’s the real test, the most human and humanizing tests of all – will he doubt himself? Will he doubt his own calling? Will he not quite trust what happened at his baptism, that God spoke from heaven, calling him beloved Son? Maybe Jesus will think that it was all in his head, some kind of crazy hallucination. Maybe he’ll start to wonder: who is he, *really*? Who is God, *really*?

Three temptations. Three tests. Tests faced by Jesus, but also tests that we ourselves face, each one of us, as we struggle on our own life journeys. We too are tested as Jesus was tested. Sometimes we don’t even realize it until the test has passed and we have already succeeded or failed. We too are continually tempted, as Jesus was, to take the easy way out. Or to use our power over another person to hurt them. Or to doubt ourselves, and worst of all, to doubt God.

These are big temptations. These are a lot bigger than turning away from the goodies we'll find downstairs at coffee hour. These are tests. Life tests. Jesus faced them and we face them too. There are high-stakes temptations that we will face over and over again throughout our lives. And how pass through these trials will prove who we are, what sort of person we are willing, or not willing, to be.

Wayne Oates, a seminary professor and psychologist, has written that "temptation is the crucible of character formation." Each of us is engaged in a life-long process of becoming. And who we become – whether we become the person God believes us to be, or dwindle into some smaller, more venial sort of person -- has everything to do with temptation and how we face it.

Every one of us has passed through life crises already, and every one of us is sure to face many more. Some are challenging but joyous, like graduating and heading out into the adult world. Or committing your life to one other person. Or becoming a parent. Other crises are simply tough. Losing a job. Ending a relationship. Downsizing at the end of life. Living with a chronic disease. Struggling through endless financial troubles.

These are the places where we are tested most. Will we take the easy way out? Or lash out and misuse our power over another? Or yield to the doubt that is eating us alive? What sort of person do you or I want to be when life puts us to the test? Will we rise to the challenge and grow? Will we just stay stuck where we are? Or will we actually regress, because we are too terrified to become the person God would have us be?

Yes, my brothers and sisters, we will be tempted. And the little disciplines and denials we have set for ourselves for the next six weeks of Lent are worthy in their way, but they are not enough to form us into the kind of people who can rise to the really big temptations in our lives. We need more than just forty days' practice of saying no.

We need the two things Jesus took into the wilderness with him, which sustained him in his time of temptation. He took, first, a deep and abiding connection to God's Holy Spirit. It's all over Luke's gospel, the Spirit sends Jesus here, there and everywhere. That deep and abiding connection is formed through prayer.

It's formed through the regular practice of turning to God, privately and in the company of others. It is formed by a practice as simple as talking to God about the minutiae of your life, throwing your burdens and cares on God instead of just bearing them in silence. It is formed by weekly worship, by joining with others to pray and sing, so often, so regularly, that it actually wears a rut of prayer into your heart that allows the Holy Spirit to flow through you. Jesus prayed all the time. We should too.

The other thing we need is a ready reliance on the word of God. Look at all the snappy comebacks Jesus had in his repertoire. He didn't make them up. They all came out of the book of Deuteronomy. Jesus was steeped in the teachings of Torah. He knew psalms by heart, he could quote the prophets. He had clearly read his Bible. Read, marked, learned and inwardly digested it.

We need that Word within us too. Not as the fruit of struggle over the meaning of the Greek, or did this and so really happen, or what would this saying mean in Jesus' time. We need the Word, very near us, as Saint Paul says, on our lips and in our hearts.

We need Bible verses. Our own short, snappy sayings that mean something to us, that live in us, that describe who we are and who we believe God is. I can give you three of my own personal collection right off the bat, ones that sustain me in my struggles.

"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." "Love your enemies and do good to them who persecute you." "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

You probably have your own, and if you sat down, you could write down at least a half a dozen or more.

Say you don't have your own little collection of verses, on your lips and in your heart. Well, then go get some. Flip through your Bible, go to the Psalms, the gospels, the letters of Paul, and choose for yourself the verses you need to have at the ready as you face the temptations of your life. It could be another exercise for this Lenten season. Come up with your own list of Bible verses that tell you who you are, that tell you who God is, and that remind you how to live accordingly.

And then, shaped by prayer and sacrament, filled with the Holy Spirit, strengthened by the living Word dwelling within us, we will find, over time, that we have become equipped to meet our temptations head on. In our own wilderness, facing our own fierce trials, we too can rise, as Jesus did, to the challenge -- and become the persons God has created us to be.