

March 6, 2022
“Tempted Off Center”
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 / Luke 4:1-13
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

When I was a campus minister at Drexel, the University published a literary journal, I forget the name now. I’m not sure it even exists anymore, but I remember that each issue was organized around a specific theme. And I remember one, in particular, focused on temptation.

To promote the issue, they decided to host a public panel discussion around the theme. It was a wine-and-cheese kind of event, not exactly my scene. It was held at First Unitarian Church in Center City, and it featured panelists representing several notable temptations. As I recall, there was a pastry chef, a burlesque performer, a recovering addict and alcoholic, and I wanna say, someone having something to do with greed – maybe a recovering gambling addict? I guess they couldn’t find a wealthy CEO to participate.

Anyway, the panel was all people who either invited temptation or had given into it. And then there was yours truly.

Representing, apparently, religion and spirituality as the antidote to temptation and sin. The “good” trying desperately to resist the “bad.” And as if to visualize how hard it can be to resist temptation, I was outnumbered four-to-one!

I am not really built for panel discussions and spontaneous articulation; I don’t tend to think quickly on my feet. But I agreed to do it anyway because I was relatively new in my role and figured it would be a unique way to put myself and the ministry I was trying to build out there in the campus and wider community. It felt like a cool thing to do, or at least to be able to say I did – or maybe you know, to be able to preach about some day! And I thought it might be kind of fun.

In truth, it was more awkward than fun for me. I don’t remember anything about what was said. After a general question or two from the moderator, the discussion opened up

to the audience. And as probably will not surprise you, almost all of the questions went to the temptation side of the panel, the FUN side, which was probably just as well.

When I did have the opportunity to speak, I remember trying to make the point that temptation comes in all shapes and sizes. Trying to broaden an understanding of temptation beyond just a desire to do something we're not supposed to do, something wrong or "bad." Thinking of temptation more as settling, as a perceived shortcut to what we most deeply need, to what we most deeply desire. A surface-level, short-sighted, short-lived, sometimes immediate "fix," an easy, fleeting pleasure often coming at the expense of overall well-being and wholeness.

And I remember trying to broaden an understanding of temptation beyond just the individual level. I mentioned capital punishment, the death penalty, as an example of the kind of collective social temptation that settles for vengeance as a substitute for justice, retribution as a substitute for restoration. Because it's easier, and at some level, it feels satisfying as a response to violence.

Anyway, that's what I tried to do. After the discussion, I can tell you that NOBODY came up to talk to me. The party was clearly elsewhere, and introvert that I am, I was OK with that. I stuck around for a bit, grabbed some free food and drink, and left.

Having revisited Jesus' dramatic transfiguration last week, we rewind in Luke's gospel this morning as we lean into Lent. From transfiguration to temptation. From mountaintop to wilderness.

The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is described, like so many stories, in all three synoptic gospels, but not in John. Matthew and Luke are more or less the same; the account found in Mark is curiously short and sweet, just two sentences: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." That's it.

For the authors of Matthew and Luke, the story carries much more significance. And within our ongoing liturgical flow, Jesus' 40-day temptation in the wilderness provides

the narrative start to our 40-day Lenten journey. And with this story, we're reminded, again, of Moses and Elijah, who had been on the mountaintop with Jesus during his transfiguration, and who each had their own 40-day spiritual journeys. And we're reminded of the Israelites 40-year journey through the wilderness before reaching the promised land.

We're told in Luke that Jesus is "full of the Holy Spirit," having just returned from the Jordan River and his Spirit-filled baptism.

In Luke's version, he's led by that same Spirit "in" the wilderness, where he's tempted by the devil. The translation in Matthew's version says he's led by the Spirit "into" the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. It's not a difference in translation; the original Greek is different.

A minor detail, perhaps, but worth noting – especially considering the theological implications of an understanding of God, on one hand, as with us IN the wilderness. And on the other hand, as deliberately, actively leading us INTO the wilderness, into temptation, so that we might be tested. Common as that latter understanding is within the Christian church, personally, I find it hard to take. I don't buy it, and Lord knows, life is test enough all by itself.

In any case, it's the devil, Satan, the adversary, the personification of evil, who does the tempting in the story. It's the devil, like the serpent in the Genesis creation accounts, representing the capacity within each of us to make choices based on FALSE promises, whether those promises come from external or internal voices.

There are three tests in this case, the classic formula. The same three tests in Matthew and Luke, just presented in different order.

We know that Jesus is fasting, and so he is famished. Not surprisingly, then, the devil shows up in the story at that point, when Jesus is most vulnerable – as temptation often does, when we are most vulnerable. Physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually.

Because, again, what is temptation but a settling, a perceived shortcut to what we most deeply need and desire? A surface-level, short-sighted, short-lived, sometimes immediate “fix,” an easy, fleeting pleasure often coming at the expense of overall well-being and wholeness.

So the devil approaches a hungry Jesus with the promise of food. “If,” IF, IF, “you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf bread.” Surely the Jesus who turned water into wine can turn a stone into bread, right? Delicious, mouth-watering bread. What would be the harm in that when he is so clearly hungry?

But that’s not the point. He’s not resisting the temptation to eat, satisfying as that would be. He’s resisting the temptation to prove himself. To prove his power.

“It is written,” he says, quoting from Deuteronomy and referencing the story of holy manna raining down from heaven to feed the hungry Israelites, “‘One does not live by bread alone.’” And the text he’s quoting goes on, though he does not, at least in Luke’s version, “‘but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Who are YOU, devil, to tell me what I need? Jesus knows what he needs. Jesus knows who he is. And Jesus knows WHOSE he is.

Again, we need to remember that just before this story in Luke, and in Matthew and Mark, is Jesus’ baptism, during which the voice of God, the same voice we hear at the scene of mountaintop transfiguration, affirms Jesus as “my Beloved Son.” Same voice, same message.

Jesus is God’s beloved. And when you are so beloved, and KNOW, deep down, that you are so beloved, you do not have to prove yourself. To anyone. Ever.

As Jan Richardson writes, “If we back up a bit in Luke . . . we will be able to enter this week’s text with the same knowledge that Jesus had: that when he went into the desert, he went with the baptismal waters of the Jordan still clinging to him, and with the name Beloved ringing in his ears. How else to enter into the forty-day place that lay

ahead of him? How else to cross into the wilderness where he would have no food, no community, nothing that was familiar to him—and, to top it off, would have to wrestle with the devil? How else, but to go into that landscape with the knowledge of his own name: Beloved.”

Jesus is firmly grounded in who he is and whose he is as God's beloved. He responds to the devil's temptation and makes his choice from that deeper place, with a longer view. And in so doing, he maintains his divine center.

And so the devil persists—again, as temptation does. He tries a different approach to tempt Jesus off his center. “In an instant,” as the text describes, the devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and promises authority over them if, IF, Jesus will worship him.

Again quoting from Deuteronomy, Jesus remains grounded in his response, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only (God).” God has already given me everything I need. He responds from a deeper place, with a longer view. He maintains his divine center.

Undeterred, the devil takes him to the pinnacle of the temple for the third and final test: “If you are the Son of God” – again, if, IF – “throw yourself down from here.” The devil ups his game with some Bible quoting of his own, setting Jesus up with a taste of his own medicine. From the Psalm we heard this morning: “(God) will command (God's) angels concerning you, to protect you,” and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”

To which Jesus responds, dropping yet more Mosaic law from Deuteronomy: “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

God does not need to prove Godself; I am who I am, I will be what I will be. And Jesus does not need to prove himself. He knows who he is, and whose he is. He responds from a deeper place, with a longer view. He maintains his divine center, and with that, the devil departs, “until an opportune time.” Cause, you know, that's also how temptation works. Waiting for an opportune time.

When we are vulnerable in mind, body or spirit, too far removed from who and whose we are as God's beloved, we are tempted to short-cut our needs. To pay attention to other voices, to pay heed to other gods, short-sighted, superficial, here-today, gone-tomorrow gods.

In the wilderness, Jesus give us a glimpse of what it looks like to live wholly (W-H-O-L-L-Y), grounded, centered in his identity as God's beloved. And therefore holy (H-O-L-Y).

It is NOT about being good or bad. It's NOT about NOT doing the wrong thing or NOT making the wrong choice or NOT being sinful. It's about being whole, prioritizing wholeness for ourselves and for each other.

As Parker Palmer suggests, "When we understand integrity for what it is, we stop obsessing over codes of conduct and embark on the more demanding journey toward being whole. Then we learn the truth of John Middleton Murry's remark, 'For the good (person) to realize that it is better to be whole than to be good is to enter on a straig(h)t and narrow path compared to which (their) previous rectitude was flowery license.'"

Wholeness comes to us when we are fully grounded in who and whose we are—even in and through the very real brokenness of our lives and of the world. It comes when we listen for and pay attention to the divine presence within us, the voice of God that speaks to our deepest needs and deepest longings.

We are broken people living in a broken world. We know wilderness within and we know wilderness all around. But we are also beloved people living in a beautiful world—people made in the divine image, made by Love, for love. For wholeness.

In that spirit, let me close as I did last week, with a blessing from Jan Richardson:

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.
Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,

named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.
Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.
I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.
I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.
I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:
Beloved. Beloved. Beloved.

Friends, may your journey with Jesus through the wilderness landscape of Lent be a gracious reminder that you are God's beloved before you are anything else. You have nothing to prove.

May that truth sink in, deep down, and may it keep you on your divine center. May it be so.