

Lead Me Not Into Temptation
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February 21, 2010 Lent 1C
Based on Luke 4:1-13

The local sheriff was looking for a new deputy. One of the applicants, who was not known to be the brightest academically, was called in for an interview.

“Okay,” began the sheriff, “What is 1 and 1?”

“Uh, eleven?” the man replied.

The sheriff thought to himself, “Well, that’s not what I meant, but he’s right.”

So the sheriff asked another question. “What two days of the week start with the letter ‘T’?”

“Today & tomorrow!” the man quickly replied.

Again, the sheriff was surprised by his answer.

“Let’s go about this another way,” the sheriff said. “Who killed Abraham Lincoln?”

The interviewee thought long and hard, but then finally admitted, “I don’t know.” “Well,” the sheriff replied, “Why don’t you go home and work on that one for a while.”

And so the applicant went home and called his friends with the good news. “Did you get the job?” they asked. “It’s as good as mine,” the man said. “First day on the job and I’m already working on a murder case!”

In the gospel today, it’s Jesus’ first day on the job. He’s still wet from his baptism, and the Holy Spirit leads him into the wilderness where he encounters none other than the devil himself.

The devil makes Jesus three tempting offers. Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness without food. He has reached the point of starvation. The devil reminds Jesus that because he is the Son of God, he has the power to turn all those rocks in the desert into some fresh-out-of-the-oven bread. A man’s gotta eat, right?

But Jesus responds, “No!” The Scriptures say, “People do not live by bread alone.” In other words, Jesus continues to trust that God will provide him his daily bread. Jesus

knows that his calling is to feed others, not just himself, so he refuses to draw on his divine power to perform a miracle that would only serve his selfish desires.

Well, the devil says, if food won't get you, surely power will! In a very sneaky way, the devil says, "I see some wonderful leadership qualities in you, Jesus. I think I'll put you in charge of everything. All I ask is that you worship me to show your gratitude."

Ah... the lures of power and popularity. We all crave them in some form. And think about it: isn't that what God has asked Jesus to do? To establish his kingdom here on earth?

Jesus is quick to remind the devil that all the power in the world is not his to give. We proclaim in the creed, "We believe in one God, the Father, Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." Everything belongs to God, because God created everything.

Jesus quotes the Word of God once again: "You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him." Jesus knows that there is no goal so noble that it is worth abandoning God along the way.

Not ready to give up yet, the devil moves to the topic of religion. "Why don't you jump off the roof of the Temple," the devil suggests, "so we can watch all of God's angels come and catch you before you hit the ground. It will draw huge crowds to God's house. Let's show everyone how powerful and gracious your God is!"

It would be an act of faith and trust, would it not, for Jesus to believe that indeed God would protect and save him from the dangers of life? Can you imagine how much faith Jesus would have to possess to jump off the top of the Temple – hundreds of feet above the ground – confident that God would send his angels to catch him?

But yet, once again, Jesus refuses, saying, "You must not test the LORD your God." Jesus certainly believes that God would protect him, but Jesus refuses to make God prove it. We should never test a promise that God has made to us.

In all of these temptations, the devil wasn't just trying to trick Jesus into committing a self-centered act. Rather, the devil was trying to disrupt God's plan of salvation. The devil was trying to get Jesus off track, to set his eyes on anything but the cross. He was trying to get Jesus to take the crown without accepting the cross.

But Jesus remains true to his calling as the Son of God – always faithful and obedient to the ways of our heavenly Father. Instead of demanding things from God, Jesus knows that God's will and plan for his life involves self-sacrifice, suffering and death.

The writer of the book of Hebrews says, “Jesus understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin.” The writer is arguing that Jesus being tempted in the wilderness is actually GOOD news, at least for us. Why? Because in Jesus, we see one who is capable of not succumbing to the luring powers of temptation and sin. In the person of Jesus Christ, we see someone who is able to do that which we are not capable of – of always putting God first, no matter what the cost.

When the devil encourages Jesus to jump off or “cast himself down” from the roof of the Temple, my thoughts go directly to the crucifixion. As Jesus hangs on the cross, the crowds shout out, “Ha! Look at you now! You can destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days, can you? Well then, save yourself and come down from the cross!”

Perhaps it was the ultimate temptation Jesus faced. As he hung on the cross in agonizing pain, struggling for every breath, I’m sure it crossed Jesus’ mind to use his powers and free himself from such a horrid death. And yet Jesus ultimately surrendered his life on the cross so that God’s plan of salvation would be fulfilled. “Not my will, Lord, but your will be done,” Jesus prayed.

How different our lives would be if we would live by the same mantra: “Not my will, Lord, but your will be done.” If we would always have that prayer in the front of our minds, we would not so easily be enticed by all the temptations of this world. If our top priority is always to put God first in our lives, then the devil has fewer chances to trick us with his lies.

Putting God first means spending time in prayer daily so that we can develop a close, lasting relationship with God. Putting God first means centering our lives on God’s Word – reading the Bible daily so that we will know what God’s Word says, better equipping us to live out those truths in our daily lives.

Did you notice? When Jesus was confronted by the devil, he overcame the powers of temptation simply by quoting Scripture. Jesus remains true and faithful to God not by anything that he does, but rather by what he says. Jesus taps into the power of God’s Word and allows the Holy Scriptures to guide and protect him. Jesus models this for us so that when we are faced with temptation, we will know to rely upon God’s Word to guide and protect us.

It’s not easy, though, is it? If I hadn’t eaten in 40 days and I had the power to turn stones into bread, I think I would very quickly start smelling freshly baked bread. I would choose to satisfy myself and justify it by saying that if God didn’t want me to eat, he wouldn’t have given me the power to turn rocks into bread. Without a second thought, I would place my own wants and desires before the will of God.

The Bible calls that sin. Such a self-centered, self-fulfilling lifestyle draws us away from God. Jesus compares it to a sheep that wanders off from the safety and protection of the shepherd. The only way for us to find our way back to the safety of the fold is for the Shepherd to come looking for us.

And that is exactly what God did by sending his Son, Jesus. Seeing how lost we were, God sent Jesus to come looking for us. God knew that on our own, we would never find our way home. So God sends the Good Shepherd to come looking for us. When we are found, Jesus lifts us up onto his shoulders, and carries us back to the safety of the fold.

Just as the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for some soul-searching and self-examination, we, too, have entered into this Lenten time of self-examination – a time to re-examine our priorities and motivations.

Lent forces us to recognize our limitations and shortcomings. We come clean not to shame ourselves or to add additional guilt to our already guilt-laden Lutheran psyches. No, we openly and honestly admit our sinfulness so that we will come to realize our need for a Savior.

The good news is that God has provided us exactly what we need – a Savior – God’s very own sinless Son who will willingly accept the punishment for our sins upon the cross. What we could not do ourselves, Christ does for us. That is the good news we anticipate as we prepare our hearts for Easter. God will take matters into his own hands and do whatever it takes to make sure we are never separated from his love and grace.

God won’t let the devil and all his empty promises win the day. Although temptation is very real and it plagues us everyday, God assures us that the devil will NEVER have the last word. God, through Christ Jesus, will have the final say.

Martin Luther boldly proclaims this truth in the third verse of his hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*:

*Though hordes of devils fill the land, all threatening to devour us.
We tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us.
Let this world’s tyrant rage in battle we’ll engage!
His might is doomed to fail; God’s judgment must prevail!
One little word subdues him!*

Believing that indeed God’s Word will prevail against the devil and all his empty promises, let all God’s people say, “Amen.”