

Lent 1 (C)
Luke 4:1-13

One of the reasons we sometimes have trouble understanding and accepting one another is that it can be hard for one person to fully understand another person's temptations. Why is somebody so tempted to do something? Why is it that they seem to succumb so easily? And when somebody does resist temptation, it may seem to me like resisting that temptation was a relatively easy thing to do.

It can even be hard to understand the temptations that Jesus faces in today's Gospel reading. Many of us have probably read this story before, and it's easy to simply read this as a story of how Jesus fights the devil and wins! But this story is a lot more complicated than Jesus simply not doing what the devil tells him to do.

The temptations that Jesus faces are real temptations. And they're more than they first appear to be.

To understand Jesus' temptations fully, you need to remember that this story is set right after Jesus' baptism. It's at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry and he hasn't done anything yet that would attract any attention. Jesus' preparation for his public ministry begins with a period of 40 days alone in the wilderness, where he fasted and prayed. And at the end of that time, he was tired and hungry. It's exactly the kind of situation you don't want to be in when you have to think and act clearly!

But it's right at that moment that the devil begins to suggest that Jesus do certain things. And in many respects, they seem perfectly reasonable. The devil tempts Jesus to:

- A) "command this stone to become a loaf of bread" – and after all, what's wrong with that? Jesus is hungry. And later on, Jesus turns 5 loaves of bread into enough food to feed 5000 people. This doesn't seem all that bad. So what's wrong with this? Probably, I'd have done it! But Jesus recognizes, even when tired and hungry, that the real temptation here isn't to turn stones into bread, but to use his power for himself. He knows bread isn't bad. And he knows he can do it. But if Jesus starts down the path of using his power first and foremost to satisfy himself, his whole mission is in jeopardy ...

B) worship the devil, in order to gain all the glory and authority of the nations of the world – well, of course, worshipping the devil is obviously bad. And in the end, Jesus knows that he's going to be given all glory and authority by God the Father. So why is this tempting? Well, the temptation here really seems to be the temptation to take the shortcut! The real road to glory and authority is the road to the Cross, and the devil tempts Jesus to take the easy way out. But Jesus recognizes, even when tired and hungry, that taking shortcuts in God's plan will finally put his whole mission in jeopardy ...

C) throw himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple – this also, doesn't seem too tempting, because not too many of us would enjoy throwing ourselves off of buildings. So what's so tempting about this? Remember that this is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and there is no television or YouTube to make Jesus popular. But wouldn't a spectacular demonstration by Jesus in the Temple in front of thousands of people make him an instant celebrity? Jesus would be popular and sought after. Wouldn't that help? But Jesus recognizes, even though tired and hungry, that his mission isn't about making himself look good. And if popularity and image become the most important thing, his whole mission will be in jeopardy ...

Jesus resists all these temptations, but the battle with evil isn't over. Luke's telling of this story ends with the ominous statement that the devil "departed from him until an opportune time."

That opportune time came later in the Gospel, as the devil found ways to tempt Judas to betray Jesus and to tempt Peter to deny Jesus. But Luke's final comment is also an invitation for us to more fully consider the temptations we face in our own lives, and to be more alert for the opportune times for temptation to overtake us.

For just as with Jesus, the temptations we face often seem, at first glance, not all that bad and not all that difficult to resist. But in retrospect, it's often the case that the real temptations in our lives begin not with the thing itself, but with the temptation to:

A) use our power for ourselves, first and foremost – this doesn't seem like a huge temptation for most of us because we like to think we don't

have “great power” like Jesus. But “power” is really the ability to employ your abilities and resources, whatever they are. I exercise my “power” whenever I make decisions about how I’m going to spend my money, my time and my energy ... (how often are we tempted to make sure we take care of #1 first, and then use the leftovers for others ...?)

- B) take a shortcut – after all, it probably doesn’t matter all that much, right? There are indeed certain “short-cuts” that are good and helpful, and that’s why taking short cuts in other ways is often so tempting. And sometimes, you don’t notice the results for a long time ... (like the History International show I was watching the other night about buildings in Haiti...)
- C) be concerned about image rather than substance – after all, looking bad isn’t necessarily a virtue, so what’s the big deal? The little bit of the Winter Olympics I’ve been able to watch has reminded me that some of the really best athletes in the world are people I’ve never heard of. This is both because I don’t have time to keep up, but also because as you listen to their stories, you realize that the very best athletes spend all their time practicing, and don’t have any time to cultivate their image ... (they even hate to spend time doing promotionals to raise necessary funding...); and when we consider what it is that God is calling us to do with our lives, and the kind of people God is calling us to be, it’s often the case that the less we worry about our image, the more successful we’ll be ...

Today, the story of Jesus’ temptation is reminder to us to consider what the opportune moments for temptation are in our lives. The story of Jesus’ temptation is a call to struggle against those moments when we’re tempted to focus on ourselves instead of on God’s call to love him and to love our neighbors. And the story of Jesus’ temptation is most of all a story of hope – not that we can always overcome the temptations we face, but that we’re finally saved by the One who has already overcome temptation.

Amen.