

Rethinking Temptation
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Lent 1
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Matthew 4:1-11

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit
into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”
Matthew 4:1

When I was younger, the season of Lent used to confuse me. Ministers would preach on Jesus in the wilderness, and then there would be exhortations to give up something we liked.

Somehow, since Jesus had gone into the wilderness and given up the comforts of life in Galilee, we were supposed to give up something too.

Then there would be a great debate about what to give up.

My mother would say something about giving up vices we were cultivating at the time.

Father, in return, would say something about giving up church activities for 40 days.

And then they would look at me.

It was totally unfair.

I was just learning how to enjoy sinning, and they were telling me to give it up.

Most of our responses are much like that.

Lent is a time to give something up, because Jesus went into the wilderness.

Some way we are supposed to be imitations of Christ.

Jesus was not afraid of self-denial; so we shouldn't be.

Well, we shouldn't, at least for 40 days.

So the time of Lent lumbers along.

We feel vaguely guilty that somehow we are missing the point, and finally we can relax again at Easter.

But Lent is more important than giving something up. It is a time for us to reflect on the role of temptation in our lives.

“Then Jesus was **led up by the Spirit** into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

We usually think of Jesus in the wilderness like we do of the great Greek myths. Jesus is in some kind of super-hero struggling against the satanic powers of the universe.

God gives him the power to stand strong against evil -- after all isn't Jesus the Promised One of God?

But we overlook the most difficult part of the passage.

He is led into the wilderness and then abandoned.

Jesus is robbed of his own strength; he is left alone by God; in the agony of the desert he falls into the deepest darkness.

That's a chilling thought is it not?

God walks away from Jesus.

It is comforting to think that God is always near; but there are numerous passages in the Bible where God turns away and leaves the person to face alone the demonic forces of the universe.

Job is the prototype of all people abandoned by God.

Job is tested, and God is not there with special strength for him to argue with his friends: he does not have enough physical endurance to overcome the pain of the boils. God is not hovering over him like a guardian angel ready to snatch him away if he starts to break. It is in his hands, whether he will live or not.

Our Protestant minds have a difficult time with this concept. We have been trained to believe that God is always near and that his grace is ever ready to forgive us, so temptation becomes nothing more than a temporary slip.

If a sermon has judgment in it, the sermon always finishes with the hope and proclamation that the God of Jesus is the God of great mercy.

The Old Testament has an angry God – a God of judgment who will let people be destroyed and whole nations perish.

But we turn the Bible inside out to show that the New Testament is a story of nothing but good news -- that God is always merciful.

And then when we come to a passage like this one where Jesus is led into the wilderness and abandoned, we overlook it.

So the first thing to be clear about is that Jesus is abandoned and alone in deep darkness.

What kind of temptation does he find there?

Very strange temptations indeed.

Jesus is tempted in three ways: first of all, if he is the Son of God, to take care of his own needs – particularly the need for food – for bread – for sustenance.

The second temptation is to test his own spiritual power -- to throw himself down from the Temple. To test God's promise to protect him.

It is the same cry that says, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross."

And finally he is tempted to become a world power and to take over the world of politics, and all the pleasure that comes from that. There must be pleasure in such power, or why would so many people be running so hard to become president?

The story of the temptation is intriguing.

If you are starving, why not eat, if you have the power?
Someone who can make bread from stones can surely feed the world!

If a person has gained some spiritual power, then why shouldn't he use it?
Inspire millions!

If it is possible to use your power to make the world a better place – why not use it?

When you think about it – the devil tempted Jesus to do things we would call good.
How can such things be evil?

In each case Jesus replies with some variant of "You shall not test the Lord your God."

We often make the mistake of thinking Jesus is telling Satan not to tempt him (Jesus).

But in the gospel Jesus never calls himself "the Lord your God."

So testing the Lord God must be what would happen if Jesus yielded to any of Satan's temptations – his yielding to temptation would be Jesus testing God!

Which indicates to me that the temptation in all three is to overreach – to put yourself in the place of God.

“God, the world is hungry – feed it! I’ll give you three days – if you don’t, then bring on the stones and I’ll do it for you!”

Test God!

God gave Adam and Eve a paradise without limits – almost.

“You may freely eat of every tree of the garden;
but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat”

What was the temptation the snake held out to them?

Eat an apple – cause it tastes good?

Not at all.

The fruit of that tree was not the apple – but the knowledge of good and evil. Knowledge they did not desire or need. Until the snake made its sales pitch. “Think what you can do with that knowledge” – says the snake. “You can do good. You can avoid evil. You will be like God.”

So they ate – and tested God!

In each case, the temptation is not just to accept what is offered and do all the good you can with it.

The real temptation is to accept the gift for all the good it will do – while believing you are **strong enough to resist the seduction of the giver**. Seduction which can cost you your very soul – or in the case of Adam and Eve, paradise itself. The seduction of being like God.

A peculiar temptation.

Peculiar to people of faith.

Peculiar to people who want to do good in this world.

A temptation we still face.

Just like Adam and Eve.

Just like Jesus.

Can it be that this peculiar temptation to test God comes with faith?

I believe that the temptation for the believer is to fall into the sin of spiritual certainty, or into the sin of spiritual despair.

To fall either way constitutes the one sin of not trusting God.

They seem so far apart – spiritual certainty and spiritual despair.

Yet there is a narrow edge between them; most of the time in our world faith seems to bounce from one to the other.

Much of the trouble in this world today comes when people of faith carry their faith to extremes!

How many people have suffered, how many people have died in the last twenty years – the last ten years alone – because of conflicts between people certain that their way of faith is the only right way?

There is nothing that warps true faith so much as absolute certainty!

Certainty which knows the truth. Period!

It is a great temptation in our world today – to believe we have the power of truth, and the determination to use it against anyone who disagrees.

To think we know all that God knows. Until we confuse God's will with our will. And we test God.

I have a fairly simple way to identify those who have fallen for this temptation.

Doesn't work all the time – but more often than not.

They hate.

No matter how certain they seem of the truth – no matter how clear they are that they speak for God – if they hate, they have fallen into temptation – and have been seduced by the other side.

It's a pretty helpful rule of thumb. If you find hatred, God is not there – no matter what is claimed.

A lot of zealous people in our world have succumbed to this temptation. To force their certainty on everyone else.

But it occurs to me that the other way to yield to temptation in the wilderness is to fall apart. To yield to despair in the absence of God.

Jesus faced this temptation, and so do we.

In a way it is the reverse of the first – the temptation to certainty – to know all – to know better than others. To judge them harshly.

This temptation is to judge **yourself** harshly.

Sometimes, try hard as we might, we do fail.

Then we bounce to the other extreme. We wallow in our sinfulness. I can't do anything right. I am unworthy to do anything right. I am unworthy for God to care about me.

And behind it all lies "I am a miserable sinner who can't do anything."

It is immobilizing, and it tests God. It tells God what God cannot do – care for me.

Spiritual despair!

Adam and Eve were terrified at what they had done. Imagine, trying to become as God! They tried to hide from God.

Who was it that taught us what a true Christian is?

A true Christian doesn't feel abandoned by God.

A true Christian always has faith.

A true Christian always cares.

A true Christian is always disciplined, never discouraged.

A true Christian does not fail.

But most of all, God would never let a true Christian hurt.

Who taught us all that?

Jesus sweat blood in Gethsemane: he hurt, feared, agonized so much. Jesus asked why God had forsaken him.

Many people were aghast when they discovered posthumously that Mother Theresa of Calcutta had struggled for decades with doubts. In common parlance had “lost her faith.”

This is not what we expect from our saints!

Well, whether she lost her faith or not, it is clear that through her whole life she remained faithful. She kept on doing what God called her to do – even when she could no longer hear God’s voice – she remained faithful, serving the poor of the earth!

Who taught us all that stuff about Christians being impervious – so much so that when we are faithful and still hurt or fail, we wonder where God could be? To let this happen to me! Where’s that angel to lift me up above all this?

Temptation is to take whatever situation we are in, and carry it to the extreme – whether bad or good. The temptation to reach too high or sink too low: to become as God, or to deny God any power to save us.

These extremes are beyond where God intends us to be.

God has set limits: “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.”

“You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”

We test God when we are certain that:

(1) we and we alone speak for God

or

(2) we are lost and hopeless and beyond God’s help.

In the wilderness Jesus was alone and Jesus was tempted.

He could have grabbed seductive power.

He could have yielded to despair.

Instead he kept centered, and moving, and faithful.

Who could ask for more?

From Jesus?

From Mother Theresa?

From us?

Who could ask for more?