

Sermon: March 5, 2017 (Lent I) – Matthew 4: 1-11
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev. Greg Wooley

Today we begin the journey of Lent – a time of self-searching preparation for the harsh realities of holy week, and for the promise of resurrection. We begin with a classic tug-of-war between good and evil, one of the few places in the Bible where the character we know as Satan or the Devil plays a major role.

In this congregation I know there are a wide range of understandings of God, including a number of folks who do not conceive of God in a personal or personified way, so when it comes to the notion of an actual being that personifies *evil*, well, that is quite a bit harder to accept. I would have to put myself in that category. I am not personally drawn to ancient mythology, nor to more modern epics involving battles between those who would rule the universe and those who would save the universe, so this great big, nearly-theatrical story of Satan and Jesus and power and destiny sounds like somebody else's story.

But what *does* ring true, and what echoes in my life, is the reality of sin and evil and temptation, and how well those things seem to know me. The temptations of my life have been customized as skillfully as those ads on the internet that know what webpages you have been to, what purchases you have considered making online, and then use that information to personally craft unwanted ads just for you. And if my temptations know me and my tendencies that well, it is only one small step to say, well, let's *personify* that. So as I read this story of Jesus and Satan, I recognize the Satan character: a personally-crafted temptation package in an embodied form, confronting Jesus as pointedly and specifically as I have felt targeted by my temptations. I'm not picturing horns on the head or a forked tail or a complexion that looks like a nasty sunburn – though many of the traditional images we will see this morning do have that look to them - but I am picturing a crafty, sneaky, evil package of knowledge about those things that have the power to bring me to my knees.

Set that aside for a moment, and imagine with me, then, Jesus of Nazareth, who around age thirty has had an epiphany. A new awareness has come upon him: of the plight of his people, on the corrupt state of their religious infrastructure, and of his ability and responsibility to be a change agent in rebuilding the link between his people and the very love of God. With this new awareness, and its extreme call upon his life, he did what spiritually-inclined people have done for centuries: he withdrew to the wilds, and undertook a time of fasting.

Whether that fasting weakened him, or simply stripped away everything that would deflect him from accurately seeing the turbulence within his soul, is open for debate, but at the conclusion of his fast he was confronted by his personal tempter. Three times, this personally-shaped phony tried to separate him from the resources that could truly help him, in favour of something else.

The first temptation happened, as ours often happen, when Jesus was at his most vulnerable. Twelve-steppers accurately identify that they are most likely to act out when they are Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired – which conveniently forms the acronym, HALT! – and I think that in 21st century North America we can add, “bored” to the list of conditions that give the seeds of temptation a freshly-turned field in which to grow. Jesus was most definitely hungry from fasting, tired from defending himself from the dangers of the Judaeian wilderness, and let's guess lonely after 40 days of solitude, and into this compromised state the Tempter asks him: if God actually cares about you, Jesus, why is your belly so empty? If you have God's own powers at your fingertips, couldn't you turn these stones into bread? And while we're at it, Jesus, if you and God are so powerful, couldn't you just solve this problem of world hunger once and for all, with a snap of your fingers?

Bible commentator Andrew Prior sets aside the question of power for the second temptation, and makes an interesting suggestion about this first temptation. In this temptation to turn stones into bread, Andrew Prior sees Jesus and, by extension, all of us, being encouraged toward “aggressive possession” of the earth. In this temptation, the tempter says that the earth – here represented by the stones – is provided solely for our convenience, and that we have full permission to use whatever (or whoever) we can find, in whatever ways we want – no consequences, no responsibilities. I need food, I can raise caged animals for the sole purpose of feeding me. I need land, I can “discover” some land and send its first peoples somewhere else. I need shelter, I can clear-cut some forest and build what I want. I need a smartphone, some child in Central Africa can leave school to mine the cobalt for its battery.

This first temptation, then, is one that calls us to fix our problems through alienation from the world around us, to assume that the world basically exists for my personal convenience. If something gets hurt in the middle of that, well, that’s not my problem. I just thank God for the gifts, and steamroll my way toward what I need and what I want. And lest we see this temptation, or any of the temptations as purely personal matters, let us remind ourselves that virtually anything that looks personal in the gospels applies to the way we conduct ourselves as a Church or a society.

The second temptation, is one where Jesus is called to “deform his relationship” (Taizé) with the community and ignore his own God-infused wisdom. Now standing at the pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple, the tempter taunts Jesus to prove the power of his God by jumping off and being saved.

While I personally would not find this to be much of a temptation – BASE-jumping is not on the verge of becoming my next favourite activity – this is a taunt that we hear a LOT these days. It starts out by creating an incorrect picture of God, then showing how ineffective that God is, and concluding that we are better off trusting in our own resources than imagining a God who cares.

Satan twists the words of the 91st Psalm to imply that God exists for the purpose of solving our problems, saving us from ourselves, and he challenges Jesus to do something irresponsible and ridiculous to prove that God has the power to save him from his stupidity. Jesus declines this foolish invitation: he declines to jump, but more than that, declines to accept this picture of God.

I hear this same logic in the unchallenged words of social media trolls who blame God and those who believe in God for every single problem in the world. I hear this same logic in those who invent a portrait of a constantly-intervening God who almost nobody believes in, then say we should abandon belief because that God is impotent. I hear this same logic, heartbreakingly, in the lives of people who no longer see themselves holding any power at all, and descend into despair when life’s challenges become too big for them.

When we assume that life is something we live individually, with God hovering just out of sight, ready to leap in and save us from our foibles, we lock ourselves into a life of perpetual childhood and even worse than that, a childhood with a “helicopter parent” called God. We lock ourselves away from our own wisdom, and we separate ourselves from the love and supportive power of community. In the second temptation, Jesus is saved from death, not by a superhero God who swoops in and saves him, but by having enough common sense not to jump. He had within him a divine-inspired survival instinct, and if needed he also would have had the circles of care of family and friends. In times of great pressure our greatest asset is the love of others – the very love of God, expressed by trusted circles of care. Satan tries to sell a life that has no God, no soul or conscience, no caring community. Satan tries to sell us on the 20th century notion of the “self-made man” (or woman), and we’ve got to see that for the sham that it is.

The third temptation, while easily fended off by Jesus, may be the hardest for *us* to resist because it is so prevalent and so sneaky. It is the temptation to alienate ourselves from God's vision of a world of wholeness and abundance for all.

Jesus, from a high mountain, is shown all the kingdoms of the earth and offered power over them for one small price: all he has to do, is bow down before Satan. In the gospel account, this offer is quickly rebuffed by Jesus and the tempter sent away, saying "You shall worship the Lord your God, and God only shall you serve" (Deuteronomy 6:13).

It may be that Jesus believed that the nations of the world already belonged to God and weren't Satan's to offer, but this quick refusal of the tempter's offer also underlines an important truth – which is true no matter what picture we have of God. Once we put something else above our commitment to the wide-embracing love of God, we are going to get ourselves into trouble. Whether the thing we are placing higher than our commitment to God's love is something basically worthy, like family loyalty, or something basically unworthy, like ambitiously seeking unfair advantage at the expense of others, once something else ranks higher than out-reaching love, the game is lost. Jesus seemed to have the means to resist this temptation instantly; for us, it may mean taking a deep breath, and a step back, and assessing what truly motivates us in any given situation. + + +

It is somewhat paradoxical, that in turning back these temptations, Jesus did not have at his disposal a resource that might be the very most important resource that we can rely on when countering our temptations. Hear these words from seminary professor Audrey West:

"The promise of the gospel is that [Jesus]...has already gone ahead of his followers, even to the most forsaken places of the wilderness; he meets them in the most difficult tests of their own lives. No place is so desolate, so distant, or so challenging that Jesus has not already been there; no test or temptation is so great that Jesus has not already overcome it.... For the followers of Jesus, then and now, these are important questions about how to live out their faithfulness in the realities of daily life, empowered by the One who is 'Emmanuel, God with us' (Matthew 1:23)."

Whatever it is we feel lured to do – whatever weaknesses tend to assert themselves time and again in our life's story – whatever hurts we want to protect ourselves from dealing with - whatever challenges in our lives tempt us to lose hope, or to place our hope in unhelpful places – this story at the beginning of our journey toward Good Friday and Easter, death and resurrection, calls us to a place of wholeness and integration that relies on God's goodness, and away from fractured, self-sufficient alienation. In your journey, know that you are never alone: you have the light of Christ within you, the community of believers around you, the holy vision of God's unbounded realm of Shalom beckoning to your future. In the name of God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, may you walk that journey surrounded by love. Amen.

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