

“RESIST TEMPTATION”

February 21, 2010

First Sunday in Lent

Luke 4:1-13

A young man shared this story with me one day. Dan was a student at the time, working on his master’s degree in agricultural science. He was a good student, top in his class. He did so well that he was asked by his professor to be his teaching assistant and help out in the office. Dan felt this to be a very high honor and enjoyed the work, but he also discovered that it put him in a unique position. Dan had access to all the files and past papers of the class he was taking. It was a difficult class that required a paper at the end. He didn’t have to do it. He had the ability and was a good student, but he thought just this once he would take the easy way out. Instead of writing his own paper, Dan looked through the files and found a paper with a high mark. He turned in that paper and got his “A” for the class. He gave in to the temptation to take the easier way. Dan told me that some years later he phoned his professor to confess what he had done, and, to his surprise, that professor forgave him.

On this first Sunday in Lent, we begin our journey with Jesus to the cross. It is a journey with many highs and lows, a journey with many stops along the way, places that provide a variety of situations and experiences. Today, that journey takes us into the wilderness to confront the power of temptation. This journey into the wilderness follows one of the high points of Jesus’ life, his baptism in the River Jordan. It was there that the heavens opened and the Spirit of God rested upon him in the form of a dove and a voice declared Jesus to be the Son of God. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus set out to accomplish the mission that his heavenly Father sent him to do. **“Led by the Spirit,”** Jesus enters the wilderness alone to be tempted by the devil. For forty days and forty nights, Jesus is confronted by the Evil One, the Adversary, who tempts him to give up God’s mission for the world and be something other than what God wants him to be. The devil tempts Jesus to take the easier way, a way that would by-pass his suffering and death on the cross.

The first temptation is that of the flesh. **“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”** Tired and hungry, worn down from forty days of fasting, the devil tempts Jesus to give in to his physical hunger. **“Satisfy yourself, Jesus. You don’t need to deprive yourself. You are, after all, the Son of God.”** This temptation to satisfy our personal, fleshy desires is very appealing, especially if we have the means and ability to do it. There is a lot of pressure on us to seek instant gratification, pleasure, and the easy life. We are bombarded with advertising to **“eat, drink, and be merry.”** By giving in to this temptation, I turn inward upon myself and become blind to the needs of people around me, becoming selfish, thinking that the world should revolve around me. It is a temptation even for those who don’t really have the means to get everything they want or desire, because they may overextend themselves financially, taking on greater amounts of debt, gambling with their resources, creating greater personal and family stress. Our nation is suffering from the effects of this temptation. We all played a part in our misfortunes as we thought the good times would never end. Hopefully we will not neglect to learn from our mistakes and rediscover the

values that build up our society and the common good and not just seek short-term personal gain.

The Bible has many things to say about this. **“Take heed, and beware of all covetousness,”** Jesus says, **“for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions.”** Jesus goes on to say, **“For the one who lays up treasure for oneself is not rich toward God,”** and, **“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”** Jesus makes it clear that if we had all the bread in the world, we would still have hungry people that, left unsatisfied, will leave our lives empty and unfulfilled. Jesus rejects this temptation by proclaiming the Word of God, **“One does not live by bread alone.”**

In the second temptation, the devil tempts Jesus with the possibility of power and authority. **“If you only worship me”** the devil says, all the world’s political, military, and economic powers will be yours. To have power is tempting, isn’t it? We tend to measure our personal and national success in terms of our position to out-rank or overpower another. Our lives are a constant struggle to improve our position in life, a battle to get to the top. It’s tempting to ignore or belittle those who are below us, or who struggle to make ends meet. Trying to build up oneself over another, I’ve heard kids call another kid **“a loser.”** I have heard adults call other adults names as well, criticizing those who are on financial assistance. It becomes even more confusing on a global scale when we are told we are the richest, most powerful nation in the world. The temptation is to think that we can do no wrong and that we are better than all the rest. I am bothered by the constant emphasis on who has more medals at the Olympics, rather than enjoying the events and completion for their own sake.

Once again, the Bible has much to say about this. When the disciples were arguing about who is the greatest, Jesus takes a child and says, **“Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me; for he who is least among you all is the one who is great.”** And again, **“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”** And again, **“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.”** Jesus again rejects this temptation by proclaiming the Word of God, **“Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”**

The last temptation recorded is the temptation of the Spirit. The devil attempts to put God to the test, to force God’s hand, to make God do a miracle. The devil takes Jesus to the top of the temple and turns the tables on him and actually quotes scripture to Jesus, tempting him to put false trust in that which appears to be so certain, that God would save Jesus by sending his angels. **“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his 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.’”** Who has the right to force God’s hand? Nobody, but we still try to bargain with God. **“If you are God,”** we will say, **“help me get an A on my test.”** **“If you are God, take this illness away from me.”** **“If you are God, show me a sign. Do a miracle, then I will believe.”** In our attempts to bargain with God, we can easily lose our faith and turn away from God when God doesn’t give us what we want. This kind of bargaining goes against the promises of God, promises like, **“Lo, I am with you always, even unto the close of the age,”** or **“Nothing can separate us from the Lord of God.”** Jesus rejects this temptation by again proclaiming the Word of God, **“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”**

With each temptation, the devil tries to tempt Jesus away from who he is and what God has called Jesus to do. If he could keep Jesus from fulfilling God's mission of salvation, then the world, and us, would still be captive to the power of sin and death. But Jesus overcame the tempter and all of his schemes. Jesus held onto the power of the Word of God and refused to give into his physical weakness, or to use his power and authority, or to force God's hand for his own benefit. Jesus resisted temptation to take the easier way and continued on with his journey to the cross.

Today, we are reminded of the power of temptation in our lives. Like Jesus, we are tempted every day to give up on our faith, to turn away from God, to give up on God's purpose and will for us in this life and beyond. It is always a temptation to choose the easier way and give in to the world's demands for wealth, power, and prestige. But because Jesus resisted temptation, he makes it possible for us to fight against the tempter's power and not give in. The Bible, the Word of God, is our strength in times of trial, as Hebrews chapter 2 tells us, **"For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted."** Entering into temptation was something Jesus had to do in order to be our Savior, for that is our greatest struggle. And even if we fail and give into temptation, our comfort is found in Jesus who did not fail, but was faithful to God's plan and mission for the world through his death and resurrection. Jesus won the victory. He resisted temptation. He gives us the strength to resist temptation, providing us with a certain salvation. In Romans it says, **"If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."**

So, be of good courage and good cheer this morning, on this first Sunday in Lent, for God is with us in times of trial and temptation, providing for us a sure defense and certain protection in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.