

We Are the Tempters

February 21, 2010

(Lent 1 – Year C)

Luke 4:1-13

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

In my experience of college life, it seemed that on every floor of the dormitory there was someone who was the tempter.

In dorm life, the tempter was the person who would knock on your dorm room door and invite you to walk with them to the library to study, but then while passing by Burger King, would persuade you to stop in for a double cheeseburger instead.

The tempter was the person who would talk you into skipping class in order to get in line for concert tickets for the rock band who was coming to town.

The tempter was the person who would persuade you to see if rubbing alcohol really could catch on fire.

In my experience of dorm life at college, the tempter was that person who tried, quite innocently, to persuade you to go just slightly off the straight and narrow path.

Jesus experienced a tempter in his life, as well.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

The tempter, also called the devil, did not try to persuade Jesus to go to Burger King.

But the tempter did try to talk a famished Jesus into turning a stone into a loaf of bread.

The tempter did try to talk Jesus into bowing down to the devil in exchange for authority over all the kingdoms of the world.

The tempter did try to persuade Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple and see if God's angels would catch him.

However, Jesus refused to be persuaded by his tempter.

And so the tempter waited to come back, at a more opportune time.

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are often interpreted to be examples of how we are tempted.

Yet we need to be reminded, once again, that we are not Jesus.

Certainly we are tempted every day in many, many ways.

But we are not tempted to turn stones into bread or to rule the kingdoms of the world or to throw ourselves off of buildings to be caught by angels.

This story in the Gospel of Luke is about the temptation of Jesus by the devil, not about the temptation of you and me by the tempter.

One of my roommates when I was in the dorm at the University of Texas is my good friend, Mark.

And, for the last 25 plus years, Mark has regularly reminded me that *I* was the tempter on the 4th floor of the Contessa dormitory.

I was the tempter who tried to persuade my buddies to eat at Burger King rather than study at the library.

I was the tempter who wanted to skip class to wait in line for prime tickets.

And, yes, I was the tempter who talked everyone into seeing if rubbing alcohol really could burn.

And in the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, I believe that you and I are the tempter.

You and I are "the "devil" who try to persuade Jesus just slightly off the straight and narrow path.

And even today, I believe that you and I still try to tempt Jesus.

On CNN, we see videos of starving children with bloated bellies in Africa.

And in our very own city of Waco, we see the social problems of poverty and malnutrition among our own citizens.

And we tempt Jesus, saying:

"If you are the Son of God, then turn these stones into bread, and put an end to global hunger."

Yet Jesus reminds us that he has made us partners with him in the saving of the world.

Jesus reminds us that if we would only say 'no' to an economic system where CEOs on Wall Street receive multi-million dollar bonuses while the minimum wage is \$7.25 an hour,
Then, through our own economic reform, we could put an end to world hunger.

Yet we tempt Jesus to do magic rather than us do the hard work of healing and social reform.

We tempt Jesus to wave his magic economic wand –
Rather than have us go to the Cross.

As a culture, we are fascinated with fame and celebrity.
We are enthralled with Tiger Woods' public confession and with Dancing with the Stars and with the appointment of the next President of Baylor.

And we tempt Jesus, saying:
"If you will just make your message more cool and hip and 'relevant,'
If you will just bow down and worship the almighty American culture of fame and celebrity,
Then everything will be yours."

Yet Jesus reminds us that bowing down to culture might bring only 15 minutes of fleeting fame.

Jesus reminds us that what makes us truly 'famous' is how much we love and how much we die to our selfish interests.

Yet we tempt Jesus to become an American Idol.
We tempt Jesus to make us cool –
Rather than have us go to the Cross.

I have seen people who treat Christianity as if it is a lucky rabbit's foot or a good luck charm.

We pray to Jesus to make the traffic light turn green when we are stuck in traffic on Valley Mills.

We ask Jesus for perfect children and a perfect house and a perfect spouse that never gets on our nerves.

And we tempt Jesus, saying:

“If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down from the cliff and let angels catch you.”

Yet Jesus reminds us that we are not to put God to the test.

We are not to test God;

God is the one who tests us and who strengthens our faith.

Jesus reminds us that being a Christian is not a good luck charm, but rather being a Christian is about having nothing, and yet possessing everything.¹

Yet we tempt Jesus to tell his angels to catch us and to make us prosperous and lucky.

We tempt Jesus to make us perfect –

Rather than have us go to the Cross.

You see, I believe that *we* are the tempters, we are the devil, who pester and cajole and try to persuade Jesus to take us on any path, any path at all that does not lead us to the Cross.

And we continue to bedevil Jesus, but at a more opportune time.

For with nails in his hands and a crown of thorns on his head,

We pass by his Cross, ignoring the hungry, homeless man on the street corner.

We pass by his Cross, engrossed in the latest revelation of infidelity by a supposed ‘celebrity.’

We pass by his Cross, speeding down Waco Drive to get to church, trying to get brownie points into heaven.

We pass by his Cross, wagging our heads and shaking our fingers and saying:

“If you are the Son of God, come down from that Cross!”²

¹ See 2 Corinthians 6:10

² Matthew 27:40

For we are the tempters in the wilderness, who try to persuade Jesus to veer off from the straight and narrow way to the Cross.

We are the tempters, who come back, again and again, at a more opportune time.

We are the tempters, whom Jesus looks upon with amazing grace from his Cross and says:

“Father, forgive them;
For they know not what they do.”³

AMEN.

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³ Luke 23:34 (King James Version)