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Luke 4:1-13
Temptation!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ²Being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered. (Luke 4:1-2, KJV)

The desert often has its own beauty. It is a strange beauty to my East Coast senses, for I detect no smell of salt in the air from the sea, and the colors at first glance seem to be forty shades of brown and grey. But wait till the nightfall comes. Wait till you see that starry, starry night! Here in the city, we are not so conscious of stars because tall intervening buildings obstruct our view of the sky, and the city generates its own light that obscures the light of yon stars. But in the desert, the vistas are wide and the obstructions are few, and simply by gazing upward you can regain a feeling for the immensity of God's creation. Maybe it puts our own daily problems and preoccupations in some new perspective. Also, in the daylight, if you find a place that receives water, my! the desert flowers are spectacular and fragrant. Altogether, I bet people who live in deserts such as the one in which Jesus wandered find much beauty there, and the desert does their souls good.

But the desert is not a good place to meet the devil. It's not a good place to twist in the winds of temptation. The chief problem is that it is lonely. If you and I are tempted, we have each other to help hold us on track. We have what Luther called "the mutual conversation and consolation" of our brothers and sisters in the Lord. And if we are assaulted by temptation, we would do well to avail ourselves of their help in the good fight. But Jesus was in that desert alone. He had to deal with the devil alone. There were no disciples nearby to watch and pray with him. The desert was worse than Gethsemane in that sense. At least there, in Gethsemane, when Jesus was in spiritual agony, he had Peter, James, and John nearby. They slept, and seemed not to pray a whole lot on his behalf, but at least they were there. But not in this story. Jesus is in the desert alone. He faces the wiles of Satan by himself. It intensifies the temptations in a way. If he yields, who is to see? Who is to be disappointed in him? If he turns that stone into bread, will it not be a secret sin? Will it not be a secret sin of the kind you and I have committed far too often, taking some comfort in the notion that at least others do not know what we have done because no one was there to see. In the desert, that wholesome constraint on our conduct - the fear of others seeing our sin - is relaxed, and thereby temptation grows more powerful.

In that desert, Jesus did not have the conversation and consolation of the brethren. He had to face Satan alone.

The devil begins by tempting Jesus to turn a stone into bread. Jesus turns down that temptation, and the story moves on to the next one. But let's linger with that first temptation a bit longer. I imagine the conversation going ahead, something like this. The devil speaks first:

“Jesus, do you not understand that if you turn down *this* temptation, this temptation of bread, eventually you are going to die. Aye, and you are going to die before your time.”

To which Jesus answers:

“I know this. And it is true that I am going to die because of my stubbornness on this point. But I do not think I am going to die before my time. My times are in the hand of my heavenly Father.”

All three of the temptations include hooks into the soul of humanity. They all involves way by which Jesus *could have* acquired a large following. If Jesus could offer bread from stones, then he would be a successful preacher. If he could have all of this world's glory and the wealth thereof, he would have his followers. And the third temptation appeals to humanity's love of spectacle. It is a deep love. It is why we love to watch the Olympics and the Super Bowl and magnificent athletes like Michael Jordan. We hunger to see something out of the ordinary, and if Jesus had thrown himself off the pinnacle of the temple only to be caught by angels, that would be great! That would surely catch the eye of people and win him followers.

Jesus declined all three of these hooks into humanity, but the first temptation is an especially moving bout with the devil. The first temptation seems to me the most moving of all. In fact, I figure that the devil knew he had lost the battle when the first temptation was done. I bet the devil's continuing with the other two temptations was rather faint-hearted, because if the devil could not convince Jesus to go for bread, he was not likely to convince to go for anything.

Because, you see, the answer of Jesus to the devil concerning bread does not quite address the power within the devil's first temptation. It doesn't really go to the heart of the temptation. Jesus answered the devil, saying “Man does not live by bread alone...” But that was not the devil's point. The devil did not have to claim that man lives by bread *alone*. He just had to claim that *without bread*, man does not live.

That is, the moving thing about the first temptation is that by declining to turn the stone into bread, Jesus thereby reveals that there is something more precious to him than life itself. And the devil probably hung his head at that thought, for what is a devil going to do with someone who cares about the will of the heavenly Father even more than he cares about bread?

That's why the devil could well have whispered to Jesus:

You know what this means, don't you, Jesus? You can see the principle of the thing, can't you? If you can do *this*, if you can pay so little mind to bread, which is essential to life, then in the end you are going to die. If you can care so little about bread after you have fasted for forty days, then your mind clearly is not locked into the question of survival. You are flesh and blood, like other people, and so you need bread to survive. But if you can pay so little mind to bread then in the end you are going to die. If you care about *anything* more than you care about bread, then your grasp on life is not quite so desperate as the grasp of the rest of humanity. It's inevitable: you are going to die. You are just too much out of step with the rest of humanity, and in the end, someone is going to make you pay for it.

And to such a devilish whisper, I can imagine Jesus giving an answer along these lines:

You are right that I am flesh and blood. You are right that I have fasted for forty days and that I am faint with hunger. And you are right that I might well die because of my willingness to turn down the bread. But I am not out of step with humanity. I am just showing men and women, boys and girls, their true path forward. For we human beings really do live not be bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. We human beings are at our best when we care about God even more than we care about bread, even more than about life itself. What I say to you now, Satan, I mean to preach to the world: which is that we find life by losing it. We find our humanity through humility to God. We climb to our highest pinnacle, but humbling ourselves must completely and obediently to God.

Some political leaders talk a good game, but do not personally follow it. They talk of kingdoms and peace and justice, but they personally are not peaceable and they are not just. In their own private lives they live as they want.

It has been fascinating, for example, to hear the reaction of people to the confession of Tiger Woods. Even before he spoke this past Friday and spoke of yielding to the temptations that came his way, some folks were saying that it was good that he was confessing his shortcomings and that surely the people would forgive him. But some people were saying that there was no need for Tiger Woods to give a confession -- that that was his private life and of no concern of the public.

Well, in today's story, we see Jesus is of the first sort of leader. He holds his private life accountable to the standards of the Kingdom he proclaims. He does not simply call the world to holiness of life, but he lives it too.

What the story of the Desert Temptation teaches us is that we follow a Master who has been there. He has been tempted as we are tempted. He was sifted by

Satan. Temptations were crafted by the one who had crafted many temptations in the past and won most of his battles, only this time, the temptations all failed. Even the temptation of bread, the very stuff of life, was turned down by Jesus.

And so soon, we hear the New Testament singing this song about our Lord Jesus:

¹⁴Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. ¹⁵For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16, KJV)

And again,

¹⁶For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.(Hebrews 2:16-18, NRSV)

When you were baptized, you were called into the holy band of the disciples. It was as if you were casting your nets there by the Sea of Galilee, and the same Jesus who called Peter and Andrew, James and John and the rest, passed your way too and beckoned you unto himself. “Come, follow me.” You might have many honors and privileges in life, but that is your highest: you have been called into the company of the disciples and into fellowship with Jesus.

Here at the start of Lent, it is good for us to reckon with this truth: to do as Jesus has said means that we follow him in this respect too, that we follow him in turning away from temptation.

Those of you who have resolved to stop eating chocolate during Lent, well, I think you have done well. Same with wine. It is good to have something physical to symbolize to ourselves that our highest loyalty should not be to our bodies, but to our Lord. You can exercise some mercy on yourselves on the Sabbath Day, since Sundays are not part of Lent, but rather celebrations of Easter, but do so in moderation. Your goal is to decline something for which you yearn to remind yourself that you yearn most of all for God.

For the real issue is not chocolate or wine or anything along those lines. They are symbols for the whole hot world of temptation in which we poor human beings are enmeshed. We live in a fallen world. We do not have the natural disciplines of the angels. There is something about us that means that from time to time, we are drawn toward sin. We are not appalled by it, but drawn by it.

Sometimes the temptation can be course and blatant. Sometimes the devil takes the gloves off and throws down a temptation akin to the second temptation he threw to Jesus:

⁵And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ⁶and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours.” (Luke 4:5-7, RSV)

Anyone with a lick of sense knows that such a temptation must be declined, powerful though it might be.

Sometimes the temptation is much more subtle, like that first temptation toward bread. What is wrong with bread? What is wrong with making bread from a stone? Why, Jesus himself does a similar thing in the miracle called the “Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes.” Still, subtle as this temptation is, Jesus knew that there was something wrong with it, and so he declined it. Sometimes you and I are in the same situation. We are tempted by impulses and longings that just are not right, and we ought to give them up, but it is a private war we wage, and we figure we can go on in that war. No one will know. We can simply continue in the torment of that temptation, when it would be so much better to simply surrender it and lay it at the feet of Jesus.

Remember that saying about Jesus and his ability to help you. Remember it, and in remembering, be encouraged:

¹⁸For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted. (Hebrews 2:18, KJV)

This is the adventure of Lent, that we lay even our life of temptation at the feet of Jesus and ask him to help us, to succour us, to strengthen our wills all the way to victory, that we might walk with Jesus with unbroken step, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.