

Who's in Charge Here?

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Lent 1 C

Luke 4:1-13

Temptation is not something we talk much about in our church. The devil is also something we don't talk much about in our church. In preparations for the Oscars tonight, Danielle and I just watched the movie *Jesus Camp*—a documentary about a conservative Christian camp for children. What is clear in that movie is that for a lot of our brothers and sisters in Christ, temptation and the devil are central aspects to their working theology. They truly believe that there is a battle going on between good and evil, our souls are the battlefield, and the costs of losing are very high. And while I personally reject most of the theology found in the film, today's reading has me wondering if perhaps we should take a closer look at temptation before we throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Mostly when I think of temptation, two categories come to mind—food and sex. It seems that films, TV shows and advertisers love to use our love of loathing what we love as the premise of their marketing. A few years ago there was a reality show called *Temptation Island* where couples signed up for a week on an island with beautiful men and women to see if they could remain faithful. Lots of TV ads talk about guilty pleasures and sneaking dessert, and try to sell us products as a way to either beat temptation or to embrace it. At the opening of today's scripture, we are told that Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. The first bit of

good news is that even Jesus faced temptation, so we are at least in good company. But this text tells us a lot more about temptation than simply that Jesus faced it.

One of our misnomers about temptation is that temptation comes as a response to our weakness. We like to believe that if we were strong enough, confident enough, sure enough, faithful enough we will not face temptation. Today's scripture makes clear that temptation is something we all face—we may face it in times of weakness, we may be particularly vulnerable to succumbing to it in times of weakness, but being strong, being sure, being confident, being faithful, and yes even being led by the Holy Spirit does not, will not, cannot, keep us from being tempted. In fact, perhaps it is when we are at our strongest that we face the greatest temptation. When I am lonely and feeling down, when I feel isolated and alone, it is at those times I'm pretty good at calling upon God and asking for God's help. However, when I'm strong, or successful, or a program goes really well, it is at those moments that I think I did it on my own and that God played no part in it.

In addition to the idea that temptation is a result of weakness, we also think that we are called to avoid evil. One of the most interesting lines in this entire passage is "Jesus answered him." When the Devil says, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him. Jesus answered him. Jesus answered by quoting scripture, but Jesus answered the devil. Why? Why does Jesus answer? Couldn't Jesus have walked away? Couldn't Jesus have refused to be a part of the conversation? Couldn't Jesus have changed the subject? Couldn't Jesus have banished or at least ignored the devil. When faced with the questioning of his very identity, "If you are the son of God then . . ." Jesus doesn't run from evil, but faces it head on, something he'll continue to do throughout the gospel right up until he

takes his last breath on the cross. Jesus sees that his call is not to ignore evil but to face it and rebuff it, not to run from it.

The first temptation is to run from evil, rather than to name it and face it. The second is to put material needs before anything else. The Devil questions Jesus call to be a servant and tempts him to make a decision that will only satisfy his hunger. There is no one else around, no one will see, why not change the stone to bread and get this identity question out of the way? And isn't that when temptation is at its greatest, when no one else will know or see? When it literally is just between us and God. But rather than satisfy his hunger, rather than make material satisfaction his first act as the Son of God, Jesus simply quotes Deuteronomy. "One does not live by bread alone." The full passage, which would have probably been known to Luke's audience, but not necessarily to us, says, "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the lord." (Deut. 8:3) This is probably the most common temptation we all face, to place material desires before all else, or at least before our relationship with God.

Authority over all the kingdoms of the world is what the devil promises next. Power and authority. This is a real temptation, not just for us as individuals, but also for us as communities and as a nation. While our involvement in Iraq is complicated, and at this point there are no clear answers or simple exit strategies, our initial involvement I believe was about the temptations of power. I believe our leaders—Republicans and Democrats alike—believed that by toppling the Hussein regime we could exert some authority into bringing our version of democracy and capitalism to that country and the region, and hopefully some measure of safety and security to ourselves. Left as the lone superpower in the world, the temptation to seize

control proved to be overwhelming. Again, power does not exempt us from temptation and can amplify the consequences of succumbing to it. Jesus response, again in quoting Deuteronomy is Jesus will only worship God. Daily we face opportunities to worship false gods and idols—wealth, power, security, all of these are vying for a place at the table reserved for God alone.

Jesus' final temptation is to test God. I love this part of the story because it reminds us that even the devil can quote scripture. Just because someone is quoting the Bible at you doesn't mean they are a) correct or b) trying to help you or c) in line with God's call for your life. Similarly, we must be careful about whether our own use of scripture is for God's glory or our own, for God's purpose or our own, is it for the building up of the kingdom or for the tearing down of another person.

Of all the temptations that Jesus faces, the temptation is the one that is perhaps the most prevalent in our lives. How often have asked for God to show us a sign, or to prove to us something, or my own personal favorite (and personal temptation) the good old "if-then" test. If you love me God, then . . . If you are with me God, then . . . If you are indeed God, then . . . The close cousin to this kind of testing of God is the If you, then I'll bargain—If you heal my mother, then I'll come to church, If you get me this promotion, then I'll give more money, If you—then I'll . . .each of these comes down to our questioning of God's faithfulness and ultimately is out of our desire to be in control, we want to set the terms, which is just what the devil tries to do in each of these temptations. At every temptation Jesus turns to the scriptures and replies—It isn't about you devil, and it isn't even about me, it's actually about God.

Today's lesson reminds us that at the heart of temptation is the sin of idolatry and our unwillingness to let God be God. To turn the stone to bread would mean that Jesus didn't trust God to provide, to long for power and authority and to test God is to doubt God's covenant and faithfulness and to believe we are in control. Each of the scriptures Jesus quotes reminds us of a time in the history of God's people when they have failed to rely on God alone. Today's lesson from Luke offers us several teachings which are particularly relevant in the season of Lent: even when we are led by the spirit, we will encounter times of wilderness, even when we are led by the spirit, we'll come face to face with temptation. Whether the temptation is to satisfy our desires for fulfillment through consumption, or to trade integrity for power and authority, or to test God's love for us, in each case Jesus reminds us that our life begins and ends with God. Lent is a season of practicing faithfulness, of setting up patterns and ways of being that become a part of our lives long after Lent is over, so that when we do face temptation, when we do face struggles and questions of identity, we'll already know how to turn to God. Lent is a season of practicing who we hope to be all year long, may God lead us in practices that allow us to put God back where God belongs, at the center of our lives.