



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
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You've Got to Serve Somebody!

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Text: Luke 4: 1-13

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. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."' Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, '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."' Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.



Sermon:

When Patty Fox had her ecclesiastical council here in January I asked her to talk about how she goes about interpreting a scripture text to prepare to preach on it. She said several wise things, but one really struck me as particularly insightful. She said, "I always look for the odd, unexpected or unusual verse, and then I ask, 'Why is this here, and is it important?'" As I was looking at today's story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, I looked for something I may not have paid much attention to before. And you need to know that the temptation story, which is also in Mark and Matthew, appears in the readings for the First Sunday in Lent every year (from one of these three Gospels.) And I've been ordained 44 years, so I have had a chance to preach on this story more than a few times.

What especially struck me this time around? All three accounts, though they differ here and there, are in agreement that “the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be *tempted* by the devil.” That seems odd doesn’t it, that the Holy Spirit of God would lead Jesus to be tempted? All three accounts have this story at the very outset of Jesus’s active ministry. And as I thought about it I realized that this little detail is not incidental, but important. Because if Jesus is going to respond to God’s call and accept his vocation he needs to sort out what kind of ministry he is going to have. So, today’s story tells us that Jesus had to face the temptation to listen to other voices and respond to other claims on him than the voice and claims of God. And the story reminds everyone who would follow Jesus that vocation and temptation go together, that who God calls us to be is always questioned by other voices, both those outside us and those within us.

Let’s look at the idea of vocation for a minute. The word “vocation” comes from the Latin verb “*vocare*,” to call, which is closely related to the Latin noun “*vox*,” voice. In our time vocation has come to mean a job or a calling, but it is a bigger idea than that. Vocation means deciding who are you going to be, and what are you going to do, in response to the God who loves you and calls you by name. So, temptation is about whose voice do you listen to? In the TV cartoons of my youth, temptation was often depicted as an angel on one shoulder whispering in one ear for the hero to do good, and a devil on the other shoulder whispering in the other ear for the hero to do evil. Which voice would the hero listen to? Of course, real temptation is more than a cartoon, and it is not about some guy in a red suit with horns and a tail, but it *is* about which voice to listen to.

Temptation is about your identity. It’s about who you are going to choose to be. In the cartoons the conflict is always cast between good and evil; more precisely the conflict is between vocation and self-deception. Did you know that the word “devil” means “slanderer,” for the devil is the one who tells you a lie about God or about yourself? The devil is a liar, sometimes referred to as “The Prince of Lies.” Temptation is no light matter. It is for that reason that Jesus tells us to pray to the Father: “Lead us not into temptation,” or as the newer translations more adequately put it, “Do not put us to the test.” But, in fact, we are tested throughout our life. We live in a moral universe, where our decisions have consequences. In the lifelong pilgrimage of faith there is no easy way, no way without temptation. And each of Jesus’ three temptations are just about that: for him to find an easy way, another route, a shortcut to accomplish his vocation.

As I thought about how to best name the three temptations in a way that you would remember I call them “Tasty, Pushy, and “Shiny.” First, the “tasty” temptation. Jesus is tempted to turn the stones around him into bread. Jesus has been fasting and he must have been hungry and thirsty. But in the Bible “bread” is more than a loaf of bread, it is often shorthand for the material things we need to live. But Jesus sees through it and reminds his tempter that there is more to life than food; “One does not live by bread alone,” he quotes from scripture. This is the temptation to focus so much on our material needs that we lose sight of our spiritual needs. In a consumer society we are tempted to value things by what they cost, to imagine that the successful life is a life with plenty of money and lots of things. But it is a lie. And even the church may be tempted to focus on meeting basic human needs to the exclusion of the higher

tasks to which we are called. Then the church becomes just another social service agency (and not as good at it!) We *are* called to feed the hungry but beware if we fail to address other hungers of the heart.

Secondly, the “pushy” temptation. Jesus is tempted to take power the way the world typically understands it, through political dominion and force. The devil says, “If you will worship me, it will be all yours.” Likewise, we can be tempted to get ourselves ahead by putting others down, especially others who are not like us. To bully, lie, steal and cheat our way to the top of the pecking order. We are told “that is the way the world is,” a zero-sum game that you can only win if somebody else loses. That is the “pushy” temptation. That, too, is a lie. And again, even the church is constantly tempted to play by the world’s rules and lose our integrity, to listen only to the voices of the privileged and powerful and hear neither the voices of the powerless nor the voice of God. If something promises to give us what only God can give, it is a false god, an idol. Even good things such as our nation or our family can become idols if they take the place of God as our ultimate concern. So, we must take care not to worship that which is not God! Years ago, when I was in the hospital after having surgery, a confused woman down the hall was calling out through the night. At one point she cried out, “Oprah, Oprah, help me!” But Oprah, with all her influence and money and celebrity wasn’t going to answer that poor woman’s prayer. Only God can do that. When the devil says to Jesus, “worship me and I will give you the world,” he knew that the world wasn’t his to give. But Jesus also knew it, so Jesus again quotes scripture to answer his tempter, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

Thirdly, there is the “shiny” temptation. Jesus is tempted to put on a display of miracles to prove his vocation. The devil takes him to the very highest point of the temple and invites him to jump. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here . . .” Angels will catch your fall and protect you! This is the temptation to choose spectacle over substance. In our celebrity-soaked culture we are tempted by the shiny surfaces. Which is why we are tempted to elect leaders who are rich or famous, or both, rather than ones who are principled and qualified. And again, even the church is tempted to choose spectacle and show, to turn worship into entertainment; to make claims that go beyond the simple faith that God requires. Take, for example, the spectacle of the popular TV evangelists, who claim on their shows that they will heal you or make you rich (if you just have faith and send a check). That, too, is a lie.

Because there is no way to prove the claims of faith, and there is no reason to ask God to do so, as Jesus reminds his tempter when he answers, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” So, Jesus doesn’t fall for the temptations. He is not enticed by the promise of the tasty. He is not seduced by the methods of the pushy. He is not distracted by the chance to show the shiny. No, Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit and armed with the words of Scripture, and that is enough. Our story ends with the devil, having completed his tests, departing from Jesus until an opportune time, which means to me that Jesus was to be tested again, as all must continually be who try to live by the God’s Word, rather than by the other voices that clamor for our attention. In each of the temptations, Jesus has to remember who he is. In a previous story God had declared that Jesus was “the Beloved Son.” Now, another voice questions that identity. Jesus’ calling is before him, and each temptation suggests that there are shortcuts that will

avoid suffering, persecution, and death. Remember that later in Jesus' ministry, when his dear friend Peter finally recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus tells Peter that he will have to carry out his vocation by suffering, Peter says "no," and Jesus says to his friend, "Get behind me Satan!"? This shows that temptation can come even from friends and those who love us

Jesus' biggest temptation was to avoid the cross. "Is this cross really necessary?" the tempter will ask. For Christians who believe that the cross of Jesus has led to reconciliation, atonement, and the promise of new life, we see how high the stakes were. In our own lives how tempting it is to seek the easy way, the comfortable path, to claim discipleship without discipline, to claim to follow Jesus, but get off the path when the going gets tough. At those very moments when our identity is tested, when we are tempted not to listen for God's word, but to the attractive alternatives that come from other voices, we need to know that Jesus has been there and understands what it means to be tested. The writer of Hebrews put it like this: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are." (Hebrews 4:15)

That Jesus was tested as we are is one of the ways he helps us through our life of testing. And we need each other, and we need the church, as our pastor often reminds us, because those who regularly meet God in worship develop the capacity to discern the voice that is true from the voice that is a lie. Worship helps you to know yourself as a beloved son and daughter of God, and that makes a difference. If we listen to the voice of God, we can't count on our lives being easy or free from struggle, discipline, and even suffering, but our lives will have meaning and purpose, and the promise of God's presence whatever may happen. If we listen to the voice of God, we can be secure in our identity as God's beloved sons and daughters and pay no heed to what the world tells us about who we are.

Our faith journey is a series of tempting voices and a series of tempting choices. We are asked again and again who we are and whose we are. Those of you of a certain age will have recognized where I got the title for this sermon. It is the title of a Bob Dylan song. The refrain repeats the claim that: "You've got to serve somebody. It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you've got to serve somebody." Amen.



Rev. Dr. Richard Floyd