

## The Devil in the Details

Luke 4:1-13

February 21, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

**Luke 4:1-13** *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" <sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." <sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" <sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' <sup>11</sup> and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" <sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" <sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

Once upon a time a minister was running late for an appointment but couldn't find a parking space in traffic-clogged streets. In an act of desperation, he inserted his car into a spot clearly labeled "No Parking," jotted a hasty note to any curious traffic officer who might happen along, and left it displayed under the windshield wiper blade. It read, "I've driven around the block ten times. I'm a clergyman on an emergency call. Forgive us our trespasses." Returning to his car about two hours later, he found an RSVP from a police officer tacked onto his note. It read, "I've walked this route for ten years. If I don't give you a ticket, I'll lose my job. 'Lead us not into temptation.'"

My colleague and the traffic officer were quoting scripture at each other, specifically lines from the Lord's Prayer. Similarly, in today's scripture reading from Luke, Jesus and the Devil trade scriptural sound bites – Jesus from Deuteronomy and the Devil preferring the Psalms.

Temptation – it's another word for choice, really, and we have to

make them all the time. It's part of daily life for free creatures like us who are able to anticipate consequences and might tease out the nuances of what it means to be in relationship with others. Temptation lies where our values intersect with our selfishness.

This story of Jesus being tempted in the desert is only found in the gospels of Luke and Matthew. The accounts differ somewhat in detail, but the gist is the same. Who or what is this presence identified as the devil? The Greek word translated *Devil* means *tester*. The word doesn't necessarily have an evil aura attached to it. Think of the *tester*, if you'd like, as an exam proctor. If the magical quality of the scene bothers you, we could personify the Devil as one of those cyclones of dust and sand the wind and sun whips up onto which in his loneliness and hunger Jesus projects his imagination.

But what is happening here is fairly straight-forward: Jesus is passing his catechism exam. He is demonstrating his rootedness in his faith tradition. He is showing he knows the bright line drawn between what he could do and what he must do. Jesus answers properly, proving himself ready to begin his ministry. But as for the tester, the proctor, the embodied awareness of alternatives that always exist for all persons of free moral choice, as for that inner voice which persistently and imaginatively opens up alternative possibilities for us, it would be back, Luke says, at an opportune time. That next time he will, perhaps, not have a chat with Jesus, but with someone like Judas whose answers will be different.

"Lead me not into temptation," the bumper sticker said: "I know how to get there all by myself!" Indeed. Every choice we make is fraught with possibility. For Jesus, a temptation might have meant abandoning the servant character of his ministry and choosing a path of power and prestige instead. We know those temptations, for each of us is powerful. We can heal or wound. We can speak truth or lie. We can live fully or hide. The possibilities are endless. In the story of Jesus in the wilderness, the choices the tester teases out of scripture as challenges to Jesus are rather ambiguous. So are ours.

What would have been wrong with Jesus conjuring up some magic trick like turning stones to bread and feeding the hungry? Aren't we trying to do that in Haiti? What would be wrong with Jesus becoming king in a more political than spiritual sense over us? The world certainly knows too well of bad leadership.

Of course, his doing those things would represent a different world

than the one we live it – an alternative universe where wishful thinking creates food and magic produces justice. That not being the world we inhabit, we and Jesus are thrust back into ambiguity where the answers to perplexity are not automatic and simple, and where we expend our lives wrestling with uncertainty, transience, and ambiguity.

This life tests us severely. We are tempted to be served instead of to serve. We are tempted to define what is good in terms of our needs instead of the needs of our neighbor. The fundamental temptation is the very one most explored in the story of Jesus in the wilderness: who gets to define what life is about? Most of our struggles around that question emerge within our daily routines, not in dark, dramatic, cinematic encounters with evil full of brimstone, flame, and sulfur. Jesus' temptations were just as banal as our own and boil down to the same issue: what are we here for?

The devil is in life's details – in the glacial turn of normal events – not primarily in grand moral collapses. Many of us don't think in this mundane way about temptation, believing it always has to do with sex or money and falls from high places – what Avery Dulles called "the warm, moist sins of the flesh." Such elements of our lives make for interesting drama, but such narrow, moralistic viewpoints help us miss the point and lapse comfortably into self-righteousness. You've heard about the three ministers who formed a sharing and caring group where they could openly and honestly expose their inmost thoughts and trust one another with the truth about themselves. One of them confessed, "I'm overcome with lust. When I meet a woman, I can't help wanting to make a pass at her." The second one said, "I'm addicted to alcohol. I can't see a bottle without craving a drink." The third one gulped nervously, and suddenly stood up and said, "I'm a compulsive gossip, and I can't wait to get out of here!"

I'm not saying the dramatic issues are irrelevant to questions of character, only that they are rather small pieces of the larger question of life's purpose. Simply put, I would argue that selfishness is really the only temptation, perceiving others as extensions of our personal needs instead of the subject of our love and concern. Our focusing narrowly on other people's failings is usually nothing more than a play to make ourselves appear morally superior. Pambos, one of the 4<sup>th</sup> century desert fathers said, "Judge not him who is guilty of fornication, if you are chaste, or you will break the law like him. For He who said, 'Do not commit fornication.' said also, 'Do not judge.'"

Jesus had something to say about that in his on-going battle of wits against the moralizers of his day, something about the speck in another's eye versus the log in the eye of the accuser. It's interesting how in their self-righteousness Jesus' enemies called him a glutton and a drunkard. We need to notice how little attention the Bible gives to the personal weaknesses that we focus so heavily on, but what a great deal of attention scripture pays to our relationship to God and to one another. Who are we going to be when we spiritually grow up, is the question scripture keeps throwing at us – the same narcissistic persons we've always been, with the same unresolved angers and frustrations, and the same unrepented failings, or someone who belongs heart and soul to someone other than ourselves?

We fasten our attention on the physical temptations to sin because they're easy to define, easy to condemn, and eminently suited to our technological mindset which assumes for every tragedy there is someone to blame and for every problem there is a solution. Well, we can design a diet to eliminate cholesterol, but how do we soften up a judgmental heart? Being well-practiced in greed, how do we learn generosity? Having learned how to emotionally manipulate others to get our way, how do we learn humility and trust? Having learned to use anger as a weapon, how do we mend the people we have bruised and bullied? Isolated and trusting only ourselves, how do we learn to become part of a community? How do we learn, as Jesus seemed to know, that everything we do to increase our own comfort, authority, or prestige diminishes our ability to be a servant to others?

I once knew a man whose adult son became involved in drug-dealing. He was arrested and convicted and sentenced to community service. His father was crushed, but very loving and loyal to his son, visiting him regularly in the half-way house where the son was receiving drug counseling and working off his sentence. The father spoke appreciatively of the help this place was being to his son, and he contributed money to it. Two years later the same agency wanted to open another half-way house because the need was so great. The father fought tooth and nail to keep that house out of his neighborhood. He had resisted the temptation to reject his son or condemn the system that condemned his son. But he had succumbed to the temptation to think of his life as private, not communal. In fact, there's very little we say or do that does not result in consequences others will suffer.

These are the cold-hearted temptations which confront us constantly: a calculating apathy toward the needs of others, a harboring of thinly disguised rage against the role life has given us, a pretense of self-righteousness which condemns and shames others and protects ourselves. Temptation always plays to our desires. The awful truth is this: we can take what we want, but a price will always be paid. The payment we often have to make is correcting the harm we have done to our neighbors by having enthroned our needs, wants, and hopes as most important. That's why temptation is an issue for us, because we are strong, creative, intelligent, rich, educated, alert, powerful. Because we are strong, it is tempting to believe we can be stronger. Because we believe ourselves good, we are tempted to believe whatever we decide is noble. Because we are well educated, we are tempted to believe what we think is wise. Because we have power and we are persons of goodwill, we are tempted to think our use of that power to benefit us will benefit others as well. The temptations which ruin us are enticements toward self-righteousness. They are the Peter principle at work in the soul: we rise to the point of our moral ineptitude.

"The power of sin is centrifugal," Frederick Buechner writes. "When at work in a human life, it tends to push everything out toward the periphery. Bits and pieces go flying off until only the core is left... sin is whatever you do, or fail to do, that pushes away... that widens the gaps..." We close the gaps by learning to trust our community. We put our scattered pieces back together when we learn to trust God.

Each day tempts us to become that scattered soul which can no longer recognize itself, which has no hold on a strong center. But for the Christian the center is Christ, who, tempted in every way as we are, chose the path of servant. Contrary to the inducements life offers people like us every day, only the path of servant endures the desert. Only the path of the servant builds the family, the community, the church. Only the path of servant discovers grace.