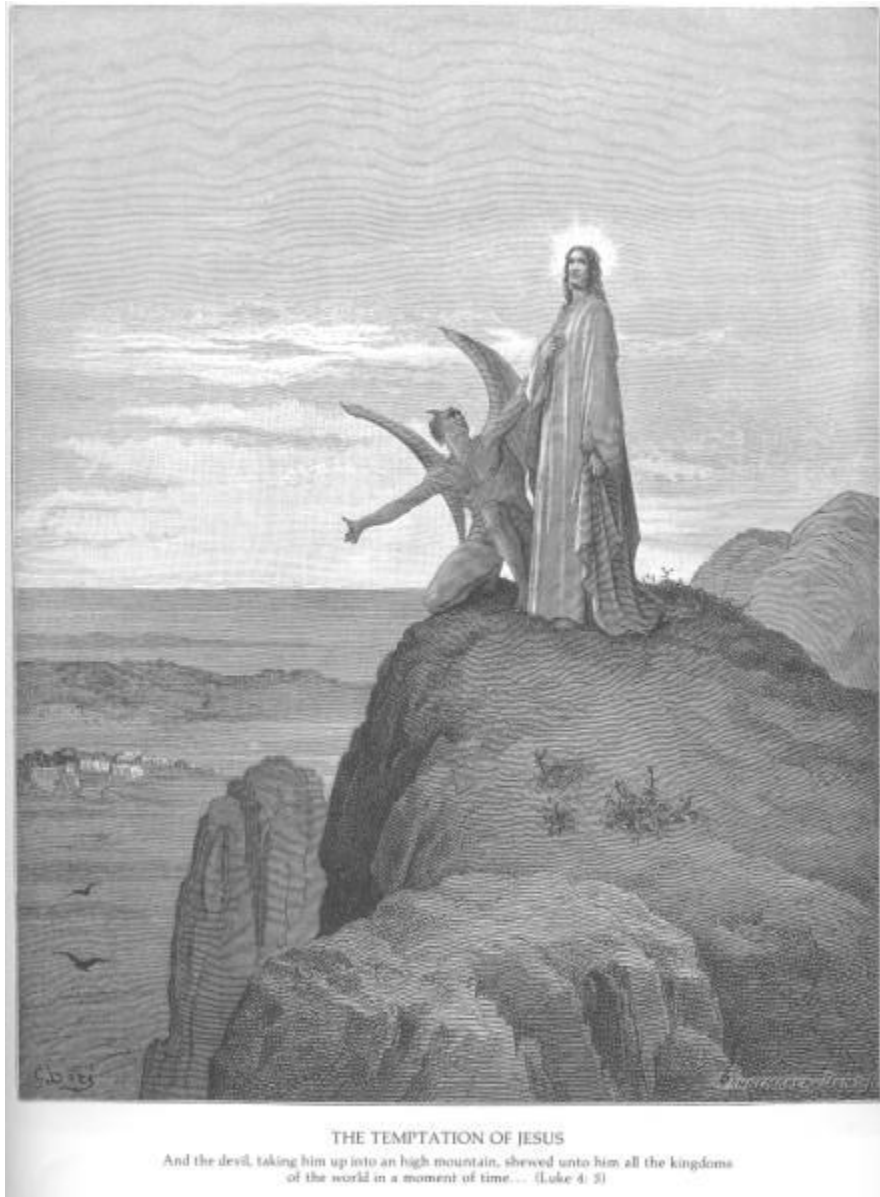


Lent, Jesus, and the nature of temptation



Luke 4:1-13

Last Wednesday Lent began. Jesus begin his ministry with a call to repent- “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). Repentance means to change your mind, or to change direction. If you have your GPS guiding you and you make a wrong turn it will tell you how to correct your course. Your GPS

will call you to repent. There were many reports about the dangers of smoking that came out and doctors began calling their patients to repent- to change their mind about being smokers. We repent by turning away from the bad, but we also repent by turning towards the good. I've spoken before about repenting towards the smell of popcorn when walking through the mall.

The Christian life has often been understood as a life of repentance. God gives us the gift of 'new life' but we often wander off the path and God calls us to repent and return to the path where we seek first the kingdom of God (Matt 6:33). There are so many other voices we have to contend with. We get messages from the radio, tv, movies, magazines, from friends, from strangers. We are constantly being bombarded with messages about who we are, how we should think about ourselves, who our enemies are, what we deserve, how busy we should be, etc. Most of those messages are in plain contradiction to the Kingdom way of life Jesus taught us. A 20 minute sermon once a week is pretty weak in comparison to that constant stream of messages about the "world's" way of life. So no wonder we wonder off the Kingdom path and towards a life that has no ultimate meaning. The orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann once said, "We live as if he never came. This is the only real sin, the sin of all sins, the bottomless sadness and tragedy of our nominal Christianity" (Great Lent). Lent is about looking at our lives and reminding ourselves that Jesus has come, and returning to a way of life that acts like it. We reevaluate our desires and ask the hard questions. Why do I want that? Will that really make me happy? Am I desiring the right things? We remind ourselves that where our heart is, there our

treasure will be also (Matt 6:21).

In the old days people who were preparing to be baptized on Easter spent time in intense spiritual preparation. It was a time of prayer, fasting, study, generosity, service, and renunciation of sin as they prepared for their new life as Christians. Christians at some point realized that it was helpful to enter into a time to re-dedicate themselves to the new life they received as Christians. So they entered into an intense time of spiritual preparation for Easter as well.

In the liturgical life of the church we often imitate parts of the life of Jesus. Lent is a time when we remember Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness in preparation for his ministry. So we also spend 40 days in a kind of wilderness in preparation for Easter.

I'd like us to look at Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. We see hints here of the Garden of Eden story from Genesis, but we also see hints of the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Jesus was tempted, but he didn't sin. Jesus shows us what real obedience to the Father looks like. This is a life that completely trusts God. I think we can learn something about temptation by looking at these temptations.

First, I want to make a little disclaimer. Jesus is unique and not everything he does we are supposed to imitate. For example, we can't die on a cross for the sins of humanity. We aren't necessarily to imitate every aspect of what Jesus did among us, however, as his disciples there is plenty we should learn from seeing him deal with the issues in front of him. We might not die for the sins of the world on a cross, but he does call us to take up

our cross and follow him. Okay, disclaimer over.

If we look at the temptations we see that they aren't actually bad things. Jesus is tempted to good things. We are not usually tempted to do something because it is bad. We are tempted because there is something good and beautiful and desirable about whatever we are being drawn to. In Genesis it says, "the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" (Gen 3:6). Eve wasn't tempted because it was bad. She was tempted because it is good. This is true in our own lives. We aren't usually tempted between doing crack or going to Bible study. Even the temptation to do crack is about pleasure.

If you have ever read the Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis you might remember the demon lamenting that they have not been able to create a pleasure of their own. The senior Demon says to the demon in training, "Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground [meaning God's]. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden."

When we look at temptation we should remember that the devil doesn't come to us with horns, covered in flames, goat legs, and a pitchfork. Paul tells us that "Satan disguises himself as an

angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14). It will be beauty, goodness, and pleasure that will tempt us. The temptation comes in getting the thing in the wrong way.

In Jesus’ first temptation he hasn’t eaten for 40 days and “The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread’” (4:3). Now that seems pretty innocent. Food is good. But, Jesus wants to place God first in everything. He doesn’t want a hint of an idol in his life. For a hungry man, bread can become a god. Jesus replies with Scripture, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" He will not allow his bodily desires to be his god. Paul speaks about these people saying, “their god is their belly” (Phil 3:19). Jesus will not allow his hunger to get between him and God.

Next, “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’” (4:5-7). It is a very old teaching that human beings were supposed to be the lords of this world as beings created in the image of God. But, when human beings trusted the devil instead of God they placed themselves under his lordship. They basically made the devil the lord of the world, which is why the devil feels he can make such an offer.

Notice again though that Jesus is tempted by a good thing. God wants Jesus to be the Lord of the whole world, right? So, Jesus is being tempted by a good thing. What is wrong here is the way he would go about getting it. The devil is tempting Jesus to a way of thinking where the end justifies the means. “God wants

you to be the Lord of the whole world, so we'll skip this ugly cross business and get right to ruling the world." All you have to do is worship the devil (who probably looks like an angel of light).

But, Jesus won't have it. Again, he will not place his mission to become Lord of the world between him and God. God comes first. God's ways come first. Jesus replies with Scripture again, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" (4:8) Jesus will become Lord as each human heart turns to him, as he wins them over with his sacrificial love. He will not become Lord as the devil hands the kingdoms over to him. The ends do not justify the means. Jesus is tempted by the good thing, but that's not the way to get it.

Next 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'" (4:9-11). Notice here that the devil is even quoting Scripture (Ps 91). Just because someone is quoting the Bible it doesn't mean they are speaking God's truth. This is why we have to be wise readers of Scripture.

Again, Jesus is being tempted by a good thing. The temple courtyards were full of people- including the temple leadership- the important priests and teachers of the law. If Jesus jumped off the top of the temple and angels appeared and carried him down safely to the ground who could argue against him being the Messiah? God wants people to see Jesus as the messiah, doesn't

he? If the leadership of the temple saw that, then he would win over the religious leadership. But again, that is to short-circuit the process God desires. Part of the sacrificial self-emptying love of Jesus is to go to those who are on the margins of society—the sick, the lepers, the sinners, the poor. People were going to believe Jesus was the messiah because “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (Matt 11:4-5). Jesus is not recognized as the messiah because he impresses the leaders with a miraculous sign (Luke 23:8). Again Jesus replies with Scripture and places God first, rather than his goals, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'".

In all these temptations Jesus succeeds where Adam and Eve failed. Jesus succeeds where the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness for 40 years failed. Jesus as the representative of Israel and humanity has successfully resisted the temptations and kept his eye on his Father’s will above all else. No other human being has been able to do this.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said, “the only way one can prove love is by making a choice; mere words are not enough” (Life of Christ). Jesus chose God in every temptation. WE are invited to do the same as we journey through Lent. In every area of our life we look for anywhere we have said “yes” to something and by doing so, we dethroned God in our life. During Lent we examine our life and see what our choices say about our love for God. In any place where our choices declare anything but our love for God we are called to reconsider that

part of our life and repent. To turn and make choices that declare our love for God. AMEN