

Lent 1 2016

Luke 4:1-13

We hear the story of Christ's Temptation each year on the first Sunday of Lent. Mark's version, the oldest, is the shortest. In entirety it reads, "The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. He was there forty days being tested by Satan. Wild beasts were there and the angels waited on him." Among the deductions I draw are these. (1) God pushed Jesus there but did not abandon him. (2) There is something complete about the biblical number of forty days-- forty days of flood, forty days on Sinai to receive the ten commandments, forty years in the wilderness before reaching the promised land—certain experiences become complete and shape us. (3) In difficult times there is danger from wild beasts, but also comfort from angels.

Matthew and Luke give more cerebral versions of the confrontation between Satan and Jesus. There are subtle arguments, important even if we can't say why. Jesus wins the arguments by quoting scripture, each time from the farewell address of Moses in Deuteronomy. According to Matthew, angels arrive after the devil leaves. Luke, a lover of angels in the nativity and Gethsemane stories, does not mention them. Neither mentions the wild beasts, which in Mark may signify internal forces that give turmoil. Neither names the antagonist Satan, calling him "the devil," an it. Maybe the devil *is* the wild beast, our destructive and self-defeating impulses.

For me the meaning of the three scenes is obscure, unrelated to life as I live it. They do not illustrate dilemmas we usually categorize as sinful. Do I miss mass either bodily or mentally? Do I behave irreligiously, speak disrespectfully of those who deserve my honor? Do I lie, cheat, steal, waste time? Do I violate sexual boundaries or exploit people who should be cherished? Do I harm others or ignore those in need? Do I indulge my jealousies and greed? These are the issues most of us work on, and they are challenging. Especially the ones involving integrity, what we do when no one but God is looking.

But those are not the problems Jesus, in his role as Son of God, deals with. Instead in his temptations he goes through a patterned build-up, almost a training period, to championship of a higher order. This might symbolize a reversal to the existential crisis depicted in the garden of Eden story.

That story has sad motifs showing the tragedy of life. Eating from the tree, falling from innocence, losing intimacy with God, becoming alienated from self. The chain of events proceeds: disobedience, awareness of guilt, expulsion from paradise. So, for me, the order of Matthew's three temptation scenes makes more sense than Luke's. The temptations in Matthew are (1) stones versus bread; (2) leaping from the parapet (Jesus doesn't fall as Adam and Eve did); (3) worshipping a false god instead of connecting with the real one. (Luke reverses the last two.)

Scene one. Hunger, stones, bread. We think of eating and nourishment, vital needs, beautiful occasions. Hunger goes beyond the actual food on our plates. It includes needs like shelter, security, love, beauty, community, meaning. All are necessary to become fully human. We get less than we deserve when any of us are deprived. Selfishness hurts the poor, but the parable of rich man and Lazarus shows that it morally kills the rich. We have one shot at life and must decide how to use it. We must wrestle and choose, make mistakes and repair the damage. Jesus says we need "every word" from God's mouth, which suggests, "truth doesn't come prepackaged; we must *use* it, not leave it as head-knowledge.

Scene two. Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge when they could have eaten from the tree of life. I suspect God wants us to have fruit from both trees, but at the right time and as a gift from him. Life and knowledge are not to be gobbled down naughtily under the bed-

covers. Each of us can behave precociously, reactively, impulsively, which does not get us where we are trying to go. If we are at a precipice and want to reach the next stage of our journey, we probably have to step up rather than jump down, however thrilling that may be. The ambiguous temptation on the parapet might show that the glory of existence is often hidden under the ordinary. We must sit in the field and dig in the dirt if we are to uncover the treasure.

Scene three. Right relationship with God, worshipping the true God. That, the great religions teach, is the ultimate purpose of life. It includes acceptance of myself as I am, and willingness to hand myself over to God at death. We have many opportunities to hand ourselves over in small ways along the way. By accepting and overcoming a disappointment, by putting up with our spouse or friend when that person is difficult (it helps to remember that others put up with me when I am being difficult), by allowing grief to go through its cycle when we experience a serious loss. All these are *opportunities* rather than “temptations” or arbitrary “tests.” Life’s difficulties are opportunities, and we can follow Jesus’ lead in how he dealt with his opportunities in the wilderness. Opportunities not just to obey rules and keep my nose clean. Instead to accept the messiness and deal with the challenges life puts in my path. Testing them out and figuring how to use them so that I will have something to give back to God, in a package he has never quite received before.

The great stories in scripture are symbolic. They hold truth at many levels. They show movement, from slavery to freedom, from wilderness to milk and honey, from agony to resurrection. There is a great arc from Genesis to the gospels to us. You can think of losing Eden, then the redemptive action of Jesus opening the possibility of paradise. Because of that we can join the fight on Jesus’ side, gaining paradise, by becoming our true selves and joining him in heaven. It can help to think of all this in linear or chronological way. But it may also help to think that the two alternatives, Satan and Jesus, hell and paradise, death and life, exist side-by-side in our mortal life. One side is stronger than the other; Jesus’ victory helps us choose and experience that side.

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