

“When Temptation Comes Near”

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Luke 4:1-13

The story is told of a local sheriff who was looking for a deputy. Only one individual filled out an application and showed up for an interview, so the sheriff thought he would start with an easy question. “So, let’s begin. What is 1 and 1?” And the applicant replied, “Eleven.” The sheriff thought to himself, “Well, that’s not what I meant, but I guess he’s right.” Then the sheriff asked, “What two days of the week start with the letter ‘T,’” and the applicant answered, “Today and tomorrow.” The sheriff was surprised with the answer, but decided to press on. “Now, listen carefully, who killed Abraham Lincoln?” The applicant thought about it for a minute, and responded, “I don’t know.” And the sheriff replied, “Well, why don’t you go home and work on that one for a while?” And the two stand and shake hands. And as the applicant leaves he thinks to himself, “Boy, that went well. My first day, and I’m already working on a murder case!”

On the first Sunday in Lent, it is okay, I think, to suggest that Luke’s gospel reads like a kind of murder mystery; at the very least it is a thriller with dramatic twists and turns. In chapter nine, Luke says that Jesus turns his face “like flint,” the old King’s James Bible has it, with great resolve, toward Jerusalem, the city where he will be killed, which is Luke’s way of foreshadowing that the end may not end well. But the opening verses of chapter four is today’s assignment, in which the “temptations of Jesus” are featured, his first day on the job, you might say, still wet from his baptism. The temptations of Jesus hold for us a fascination to this very day, and have become a kind of model for how we can face temptations.

They are well known. One was to turn the thin stones along the road into bread. It would have been a legitimate thing to do; he was hungry as the result of his fast. Another temptation involves power and prestige. The tempter, echoing another tempter who crawled around in a garden, suggests that he could give both to Jesus. And when you come to think about it, neither power or prestige are bad things in and of themselves. Is not a degree of confidence and recognition a good thing? The final temptation involves security. “If you are the Son of God,” the Tempter mocks, “throw yourself down from here, and the angels will run to your rescue.” Where’s the temptation here, you ask? Are we not pretty big on security these days? And like any contemporary writer of mysteries might be tempted to conclude, Luke ends this episode with, “And when the devil had exhausted every kind of temptation, he withdrew until his next opportunity.”

Luke wants us to ask “what would have been so wrong had Jesus given in to these temptations?” What’s so bad about bread, confidence, and security? Nothing, really, is the first answer. But it is an answer shrouded with suspicion that the temptations are not simply about bread, power, and security, but a kind of test, an ordeal, an examination. Will Jesus live as a human being, utterly dependent on God, vulnerable to starvation and the desire for material things and security? Or will he take a short cut, work a little magic, turn to other resources? And as with all great thrillers, heaven and earth waits and watches to see what Jesus decides.

Well, some of the waiting is over; we know what Jesus decides. But every year, modern-day followers of Jesus gather around these same temptations. And, herein lies the homework of Lent: To ask ourselves, will we live in raw trust, dependent on God, openly confessing that we are vulnerable to all sorts of things? Our choices will reflect our answer.

Just a few days ago, we gathered in here to hear the plot line of the larger human story: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return. “Star-dust, really, which links us to all of creation, even as it reminds us that we are beloved. But it does so as paradox: We are beloved of God, and we will die. The first truth does not prevent the second. The second truth does not negate the first. In the chapter just before today’s, Jesus, at his baptism, hears this bottom-line truth about his own identity: he is God’s Son, precious and beloved. But, led by the Spirit, Jesus must learn how to experience that love in a bleak and lonely desert. He has to trust that he can be beloved and famished, precious and insignificant, valued and vulnerable at the same time. He has to learn that God’s care resides within his flesh-and-blood humanity. Or as Steve Garnass-Holmes reminded us on Wednesday when we put ash on our foreheads – dust and the breath of God that animates all things belong together. The truth that Jesus is beloved does not transcend the other truth that he is dust. And us?

If you are looking for a point, a single point to take with you this week, perhaps it should be this: When temptation comes near, the paradoxes of life come as well. Temptations come through the doors of good things, and our lives read like thrillers.

Are you familiar with T. S. Eliot’s thriller *Murder in the Cathedral*? It is the dramatic portrayal of the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket, written as verse or poetic drama. It was first performed in 1935 but is set in 12th century England. The archbishop faces four tempters, the first three more or less reflect the temptations that Jesus faces. And the fourth? Well, it is sort of the clincher, meant to be the closer, for it brings Becket face-to-face with his dream of martyrdom. The tempter asks him: “What can compare with the glory of saints, dwelling forever in the presence of God? Oh, Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest on earth, to end up high in heaven.” But, Becket realizes the subtlety of the temptation. If he becomes a martyr to satisfy his own desire for fame and immortality, he would not be a true martyr, but a traitor to his own ideals. And so, he reaches this conclusion: “The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.”

One writer I consulted this week admits that temptations are not usually about blatant wrongdoing; most of the people she knows are not busy committing crimes or scheming how to live destitute lives. And I would agree. And yet, this question leaped off her blog post: “But what about our desire to do something good by way of a shortcut, that just marginally blurs true integrity, or allows a gift to seem altruistic, when it really masks our personal pride? True temptation encourages us to justify “the means by the end” and make “tiny, incremental compromises.”

Doing the right thing for the wrong reason can become the wrong thing. But the reverse is also true. Sometimes the right thing to do is said to be wrong by the very laws and standards we have put into place to guide us. And this is where we find ourselves as a denomination, I think. Now that we are a week or so beyond the Special General Conference, like most of

you, I've not put on sackcloth and ashes, well ashes, I guess, but for another reason. Nor have I offered even muted thanksgiving or discreet high fives. It is not for me to be an animated thermometer that reflects the current mood – not mine, or the annual conference's or jurisdictional conference's. If you would like to talk about all this, I hope you will seek me out and others, and share your thoughts. Our Council will no doubt discuss our own "way forward" during our next regularly scheduled meeting on March 26.

In the meantime, perhaps we can think about our motives and methods. Let Becket's words awaken us: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason." As your pastor, I will work to resist every temptation that would distract me from being a helpful resource for this local church. We, together, will discern how we will do the right things for the right reasons. Throughout our 120 year history, we are known as a people and a place that builds people up, helps and encourages them, in the hopes that, even if we disagree, we will not be destructive. And as long as I am your pastor that will remain our primary method and motive. We will strive to do no harm.

Well, this is the first Sunday of Lent, temptation Sunday, I guess. And tomorrow, God willing, will be another day, and you can bet that it will be filled with temptations that will remind us of the great paradoxes of life. But none so amazing as this: God kneels down and scoops up dust from the earth and breathes into us. It is ours to attend to the breath and to the dust, for without its grit the breath cannot sing. So, let us sing, while we can. Amen.