

Tested and Approved
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Luke 4:1-13
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Loving God, we come with hesitant steps and uncertain motives to sweep out the corners where life's chaos has accumulated, and uncover the ways we have strayed from the way set forth by Jesus. Nurture the faint stirrings of new life, where your spirit has begun to grow. Let your healing light transform us, for You alone can bring new life and make us whole. Amen.

If a known gangster, a killer, came to you and offered your church or religious institution 2 million dollars for your ministry; would you take it? That was the question posed to 5 local religious leaders by the host of a public radio broadcast some 25 years ago. I thought at the time that it was quite the question! I didn't need to wait long before the first response.

One of the guests responded immediately with an emphatic "YES! Yes, of course I would take that money!" I remember thinking to myself...Wow! He answered that one a little too quickly! He went on to explain that he would make good use of the money and that it would provide benefits beyond its troubling origin. "Think of the people we could help with that money! Yes, I would take it... without question!"

I still felt uneasy. It felt like such a question required time for prayerful consideration and maybe a not so obvious answer. The temptation was too great for him to resist I guess. Life is filled with temptations isn't it?

I find temptations frequently have a hidden darker side. At first glance all appears well until the destructive qualities lurking under the surface make their presence known. Temptations can be subtle and if we are not careful, we will find ourselves in a place we do not want to be.

When we look at the three temptations offered to Jesus, at first glance they appear to be fairly innocent, nondescript, not too bad really — considering the source. After all, Jesus wasn't tempted to kill anyone or hurt anyone outright. He was hungry; what's the harm in turning a few stones to bread? He had amazing powers — why not fly? Heck, Superman did it and look where it got him!

He possessed natural leadership abilities, why shouldn't he aspire to some political office. Can you imagine the campaign slogan. "JESUS CHRIST – MAKE NAZARETH GREAT AGAIN!" Somehow that association doesn't feel right!

These three temptations really don't seem too bad on the surface. But, Jesus saw through the veneer of the tempter's promise. And turned him down three times. Thank God!

What about us? On this first Sunday of Lent what might we learn from this encounter in the desert? How might the ways of Jesus' guide us?

Let me offer a couple of things to prayerfully consider...

- 1) I believe that it is easy to be seduced into believing that the way of faith is primarily a journey of comfort & affirmation with known destinations that never surprise or enlighten.

- 2) I also believe that in today's society it is hard to ignore the allure that somehow we are better than others, being just a little "More Special than the Rest"—A conviction that is sometimes held in the quiet recesses of our psyche, or perhaps it finds its voice in pronouncements that can't be ignored.

Our daughter Laura graduated from her high school almost 3 years ago. To help her celebrate her accomplishments, Lisa asked her if she would like us to pick up a yard sign being distributed by the school office. We could join the parents of other graduates and post the sign in front of our house as a way of heralding her status as a graduate.

"Under no circumstances do I want you to do that!" came the reply. "Have you seen the signs, and the slogan our class chose to put on it?" *Graduating Class of 2013, Better than the Rest!* Better than the rest! What a thing to say! And yet, in how many ways does our society reinforce this tempting attitude among the young and fit?

Isn't that the very attitude we want to instill in our children? That they stand out. That they are somehow blessed beyond the norm. Don't we, as parents, want our children's foundation to include such rock solid convictions? Won't that offer our beloved a chance to feel good about themselves and allow them to negotiate the challenges of life more successfully? Don't we all want to stand out in some way—to be recognized as special?

Or is there another way? Henri Nouwen, the late Dutch Roman Catholic spiritual writer, published a thoughtful little book, *In the Name of Jesus*. In it he identifies some temptations for modern Christians that relate to the three temptations of Jesus. He addressed our desire to be truly spectacular, better than all the rest.

Nouwen describes this temptation as the pressure to do something that will win great applause. Stardom and individual heroism are, he feels, aspects of our competitive society that make their way ever so silently into the life of the church.

Think of those first disciples who were walking beside Jesus and arguing over who would leave the more impressive legacy. This temptation has been with us from the very beginning of the journey of faith.

Is there a better way? Nouwen found when he left behind 20 years of teaching at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard to live and work with the mentally and physically challenged, things changed for him quite dramatically. Since his clients were unable to read and knew nothing of his accomplishments it changed how he viewed his life.

Nouwen states, "These broken, wounded and completely unpretentious people force me to let go of my relevant self — the self that can do things, proves things, builds things" He found himself completely vulnerable and, "Open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments." "I am deeply convinced," he reflected, "that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self".

Our accomplishments, he thought, are not important. What matters is, "God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim: that love is the true source of all human life". O mortal, what is good? And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

To walk humbly. What does that mean? How can humility change one's perspective and one's life? I am still discovering its virtues. And honestly, it is not always an easy walk but I am convinced that it is the

way.

Now, walking in a spirit of humility as a church does not mean we are disengaged or unchallenged in our life of faith. For it is easy to be seduced into believing that the way of faith is primarily a journey of comfort & affirmation with known destinations that never challenge or surprise or enlighten.

A favorite cartoon...



Referring to the temptation of Jesus in the desert, Barbara Brown Taylor gives a wonderful description of how Lent came to be (after all, it's not in the Bible). Many years after Jesus had not returned as quickly as expected, church folks, "...Decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was hard to pick them out from among the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for championing the poor, the voiceless, and the disenfranchised. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy and God moaned out loud!"

So, the church dug deep into its faith story, recalling the time (always with the number forty involved) that Israel, Elijah, and Jesus each spent time in the desert, wandering and suffering, longing and learning: spiritually hungry. And they recognized that during those lean and reflective times the people of Israel discovered their identity, and Elijah found strength to reflect God's desires, and Jesus... well, it is no mistake that the gospel writers place this story at the start of his ministry. Such wilderness times brought perspective and clarity of purpose.

"So the church announced a season of Lent...an invitation to a springtime of the soul," Taylor writes, "Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone...to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply ourselves." Then as now, folks had their "pacifiers," as Taylor calls them, all the things and ways that we keep ourselves from feeling what it means to be fully human, even if that means being in pain or being afraid or uncomfortable for a time.

The danger is that our pacifiers can convince us that we don't really need God.

In fact, Taylor believes such struggles to avoid the wilderness times can lead to addictions or, "Anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone." She claims, "That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered room of our loving God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying."

Friends, Lent is a time set aside to fill that space with the Grace of our loving God. As people of faith

we are asked to reject the tempting notion that comfort is the exclusive goal of being church. For Lent is about reflection and renewal. And renewal sometimes takes effort and commitment and even a hard look at one's self; which is not always easy.

As we continue into this Season of Lent... Let us be the church. Let us humbly follow in the ways of Jesus with hearts and minds open to new ways of being faithful in this world. Let us offer mutual support to one another for this spiritual journey so we might all grow from the experience of God's presence in our midst. Let the allure of comfort and affirmation pass over us so that we may experience our own wilderness "as an invitation to the springtime of the soul."

Luke 4:1-13

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