

The Temptation of the Lesser Good

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Text: Luke 4:1-13

There is a story told about one of the first Islamic rulers, the Caliph ‘Umar. ‘Umar, was renowned in Islamic tradition for his piety, his strong sense of justice and his sympathy for the poor. According to the story, ‘Umar was awakened from a deep morning sleep by a stranger. “Wake up, you’re going to miss the morning prayer.” (Muslims are required to pray five times a day, with the first prayer coming at the very first sign of light in the East.) “Who are you?” ‘Umar asked, as he bestirred himself. “I’m Satan,” the stranger replied. “Satan! Why would Satan wake me so that I can do my religious duty?” “Because I know you,” was the reply. “I know that if you missed the prayer, you would be so remorseful that you would do all kinds of good deeds to atone for your sin. You would feed the poor, give widows a home, adopt orphans. I prefer that you do the lesser good.” Maybe this is the equivalent of the “thoughts and prayers” that routinely get promised by our politicians after a mass shooting instead of their taking responsibility for gun violence in our country.

In today’s lesson from Luke, we meet a Satan who seems almost as counter-intuitive as the one in this story from the Islamic tradition. The gospel writers actually don’t describe Satan—but it doesn’t seem that he’s either the Old Testament serpent or the red guy with horns, pitchfork and a tail, a getup that is very popular

around Halloween time. No, for all we know, the New Testament Satan is a regular guy; and he's someone who talks like a regular guy. The evil embodied by this Satan isn't some monstrous or impersonal force. Evil is personal; evil is even conversational. In fact, Satan is so much like one of us that he quotes scripture, which should remind us that there's nothing magical about words of scripture. As is the case with all words, context is everything. Scripture can be used for good or for ill; it all depends on who uses it, and for what purpose.

If you're looking for something provocative or salacious in Satan's temptations of Jesus, you're going to be disappointed. You won't even find one of the seven deadly sins. In fact, we might ask, "What's the big deal about these temptations?" Satan first tempts a famished Jesus to change stones into bread. In other words, Satan tempts Jesus to use his divine power to feed himself. This would represent a violation of Jesus' fast—kind of like eating that cake that we've sworn off during Lent—but, after all, what's the harm in that? A little magic, a little bread to take the edge off the hunger: who's that going to hurt?

And what about the second temptation, showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offering him power over all of them? Well, who better to rule the world than Jesus, for heaven's sake? Wouldn't that be an improvement over Herod or Caesar, or . . . fill in the blank? Don't we even talk about the Kingdom of God? This could actually be a shortcut that could save us in the church a whole of fuss and bother. Just put Jesus in charge of the world.

And the most puzzling temptation is the third: just a little magic trick, Jesus, to prove that you're who everybody is saying that you are, the Son of God. Just jump off the pinnacle of the temple and the angels will catch you. It says so in the Bible! We just read it in the psalm! So, why not just prove that the Bible's right? What's the harm?

These temptations don't even come close to the ones that we consider to be the biggies: the temptation to be unfaithful in a committed relationship; the temptation to lie in order to get ahead, or to steal, or even to destroy a rival or someone you don't like. Those are the real temptations, right? Those, along with covetousness and envy are the ones that populate our lives, right?

The temptations posed to Jesus, though, have at least two things in common, two characteristics that make them particularly dangerous, and tempting, to Jesus, yes tempting. The first is that in all three temptations, Satan tries to get Jesus to focus entirely on himself. "Change these stones into bread—for yourself. Here are all these kingdoms that will be—yours, if you just worship me. Jump off the roof of the temple to show your special status—the angels will rescue you."

But Jesus' life, death and resurrection are the exact antithesis of the innate human self-interest that Satan so persistently appeals to. Jesus comes to us to teach and to heal, to live and to die, not for his own glory and reputation, and certainly not to prove his own greatness. The bread of life that Jesus shares with his disciples--and, at communion, with us—and the loaves and the fishes that he multiplied for the crowds of people who heard him preach, are gifts to others, and gifts to us.

Nor does Jesus seek the power that the crowds and even his followers expect him to wield. When the crowds await his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, they don't expect to see someone coming into the city seated on a donkey, the most humble of animals. "My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus told Pilate. St. Paul puts it eloquently in his letter to the Philippians: "Though Jesus was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave."

And when Satan tries to get Jesus to rescue himself, or to call upon the angels to rescue him when he's supposed to test God by jumping off the temple pinnacle, Jesus refuses. And he lives out that refusal by willingly suffering on the cross, even while the crowds tempt him to remove himself from the cross. "If you're really God's Son," they shouted, "then take yourself down from the cross."

So, the second thing about these temptations is that Satan tries to persuade Jesus to be something that he isn't, which is self-centered and self-absorbed. And that involves making Jesus to be more than human. Satan wants to thwart God's great project, God's bold effort to bridge the abyss between the God and the us. Satan wants to frustrate God's attempt to bring humanity back to God's loving arms, God's desire to rescue us from separation and alienation from God and each other, which is what we call sin. In Jesus, God shows us in the most persuasive and eloquent way what it means to be one with God. It's why we say, in so many different ways, that in Jesus, God becomes like us, so that we might become more like God. And Satan wants to destroy this project. Satan wants Jesus not to be a human being, but rather God with a human disguise that fits like a cheap Halloween mask. But while Satan wants to keep God permanently sealed in a remote and irrelevant heaven, God wants to be revealed as love in the flesh, love that we can understand, love that continues to live among us.

Satan tempts Jesus with the shortcut of divinity. Out there in the lonely wilderness, Satan tries to get Jesus to do the lesser good, to take the easier path: not the flagrant sin, but the insidious one; not a sin that screams its evil, but the half-measure that at some level makes sense, and is all the more dangerous because of that. And Jesus is tempted. That's why they're called temptations. Jesus was tempted. "Father, if it be your will, let this cup pass from me," he said in the garden of Gethsemane. Even, and especially, at the brink of a horrible, tortured death, Jesus is

tempted, tempted to take the easy way out, or, to borrow that phrase from the story of ‘Umar, to do the lesser good.

This story of the temptation of Jesus explains as no theological construct can the significance of the incarnation, of Jesus as Immanuel, God with Us. It has to do with a Jesus who is human, who, like all of us, is compelled to make choices, who is tempted by the lesser good. Jesus pours out his very being so that we too will have the freedom, the sometimes frightening freedom, to choose. In Jesus, God becomes weak so that we can become strong, so that with our precious freedom, we can make the choices that will bring us closer to God, to the God who is love.

And this is why the temptations of Jesus become our temptations, too. Like Jesus, we’re tempted to choose the lesser good—not the sin that is scarlet, but the sin that is gray—the sin that looks, well, kind of good, or we might say, “good enough.”

Where does the lesser good tempt you? When I was growing up, I was responsible for mowing the family yard. One day when I did a particularly slipshod job, my father took me aside and said words that I’m almost positive you all heard from a parent, or perhaps from a teacher. “Anything that is worth doing is worth doing right.” Well, this simple straightforward principle of honesty and pride in one’s work is one that can, and should be projected into our faith lives. If we are going to be Christians, if we are committed to being followers of Jesus, it’s not a part-time or half-hearted thing. It’s not a matter of being a “kind of good” Christian, because that means accepting the lesser good. To be a Christian means to try to live in imitation of Christ, and Jesus never settled for the easier way: he refused to change stones into bread to satisfy his very real hunger; he refused to deprive us of our freedom for the sake of power over humanity, because Jesus didn’t come to exercise that kind of coercive power over us; Jesus refused to perform a kind of

magic trick so that he could avoid the pain of being who he was called to be, a man who loved the world so deeply that he was willing to lose his life for it.

Every year, on this first Sunday of Lent, we read the temptation story because we need to be reminded of what Lent is really about. Lent is not about giving up your favorite food; Lent is about taking up the cross. Lent is not sackcloth and ashes about the misdeeds we have done; Lent is struggling with the temptation to be someone less than God wants us to be. We don't do battle with some external demon, whether a serpent or a little red man with a pitchfork; we do battle with ourselves, with our own inclination to stray from God's mercy and God's will for us.

It isn't in Luke, but it is in Matthew and Mark, that at the conclusion of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, the angels came and ministered to him. This is one of the most beautiful images in the Bible. It is one of those bright spots in the story that should keep us going to during a spiritually strenuous time. There are angels who minister to us. Not the kind with wings and harps, but the person who gives us a hug when we really need one. Maybe the angel is a loving parent, or a committed teacher, or even the memory of someone whom we admired because that person was worthy of admiration. As you struggle along on your Lenten journey, look for those angels, for they are all around you. I dare say they're here this morning. They'll give you the spiritual food that you need, the power of love that will sustain you, and the courage to face the most difficult moments in your life. Don't settle for the lesser good. For the good life, the *good* life is the one that will give you an eternity of joy.

Amen.