

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
March 6, 2022 – The First Sunday of Lent  
Luke 4:1-13 – The Temptation of Christ  
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Every year on the first Sunday of Lent we hear an account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness because this is the basis of our observance of Lent, when for forty days we are invited by the church to "self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and reading and meditating on God's holy Word," in the words of the Ash Wednesday liturgy. This event in the life of Christ is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We are reading Luke's Gospel this year, so we just heard his detailed account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

Luke's perspective is that it is God's purpose for Jesus to undo the harm that had come from the sin of Adam and Eve, who listened to the evil serpent and disobeyed God. In order to do this, Jesus had to confront the powers of evil and conquer them. His struggle with evil begins in his temptation in the wilderness. For the writers of scripture, the wilderness is a place of fear inhabited by beasts and the powers of evil. Here the devil tempts Jesus, who resists temptation and remains steadfast in obedience to God.

We must remember that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. God created human beings with free will, with freedom to choose God or God's enemy, good or evil. Jesus had free will. As a fully human being, Jesus could have listened to the devil and given in to temptation. We are so familiar with the fact that Jesus "was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin," that we may overlook how real the battle was that was waged during those forty days. Jesus might have sinned, because he was human and he had free will.

It is a condition of human life that we are all tempted to sin, to turn away from God, to allow ourselves to be the centers of our universe, to choose the corrupt ways of the world instead of God's ways of righteousness and justice and mercy. We fail to love God with all our hearts. We fail to love our neighbors as ourselves. We all sin. In the First Letter of John we read, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). In this we are different from Jesus. We are not without sin, as he was. Nevertheless, I think we can learn several things from Jesus' experience of temptation in the wilderness.

After his baptism Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit and "was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." The Spirit – God – was within Jesus to help him resist temptation. The Spirit was with him to aid him in this contest. In our collect this morning we asked God to come quickly to our help when we are tempted; "let each one find you mighty to save." We need God's help in the battle with evil. We can't "force" the Holy Spirit to help us, of course. But we can actively seek the help of the Spirit. We can pray. We can take time to be quiet and examine ourselves and our temptations. We can read scripture and other holy works. We can attend church and receive the Eucharist. We can spend time with other people of faith who are attempting to live by God's ways. We can share our struggles with other faithful people. We can rely on the habits we have formed over the years of helping others. There is much that we can do to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit within us, the Spirit that leads us away from temptation and closer to God.

In the wilderness encounter between the devil and Jesus, both quote passages from the Hebrew Bible. I find that of interest in today's world. Some Christian people make use of scripture to exclude and reject people, to consign certain people to hell, to wage a battle between one group of Christians and others. Even the Bible – God's holy Word – can be used for evil purposes by sinful human beings. Jesus saw through the devil's attempt to misuse scripture. I believe we can pattern ourselves after Jesus in seeking deep familiarity and understanding of scripture, especially of the most important themes of love and justice and compassion and mercy. This knowledge can help us greatly when we face temptation.

For those of us who are religious, it is important to remember that in all times and places some people use what is holy for evil purposes. Jesus often confronted Jewish religious leaders of his day for misusing God's law, for burdening others, for regarding the teaching of God as more important than God, for their complacent self-righteousness. Top religious leaders were involved in Jesus' crucifixion.

There is and has always been evil in the Christian church as well. It is good to be watchful and not to stray from God's paths in the church. The church and church traditions must not become more important to us than Jesus, more "sacred" than God. That is idolatry.

When we are tempted to sin, we do sometimes "win" the battle. And wouldn't it be wonderful if that battle was well and truly over? Luke tells us that "when the devil had finished every test, he departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time." Even for Jesus the battle with evil would continue throughout his life and especially when, in the words of Luke, "Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot," who "conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray [Jesus] to them" (Luke 22:3-4). Temptation lasts throughout our lives. It is unwise to grow spiritually complacent.

It is also unwise to forget that we sometimes fail in our battle with sin. We do fall short of obeying God's commandments to love – God, our neighbors, and ourselves. We need to hold in tension our desire to live in the way of love and a realistic appraisal of both our "successes" and "failures" in living in the way of love. We acknowledge our failure to God in faith that God will forgive us when we turn to God and ask for God's mercy. The process of true repentance is costly, never simply a matter of saying, "Sorry, God! I won't do it again, so everything is okay now, right?" True repentance means a change of heart, a turning around, a new way of seeing and being and doing. True repentance requires a humble spirit and a willingness to keep at the work of being transformed into the image of God we are created to be. In the realistic, challenging and encouraging words of St. Benedict, "Always, we begin again."

Scripture teaches us that evil exists and is powerful, that there is true opposition to God and rebellion against the will of God. We can and must oppose evil according to our circumstances and strength, evil in ourselves and in the world we live in. But we human beings cannot overcome evil on our own. Our hope lies in God's power to overcome evil. We believe that Jesus has defeated the powers of evil by his cross and resurrection. We believe that in the end his victory over evil will become apparent to all of creation. We believe that there will be a new heaven and a new earth and God's peace at last. In these troubled times, good people, hold fast to this, your faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.