

“Tempted and Triumphant” GPPC 3-10-19
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16, Luke 4:1-13

As you may know, sermons take various forms, often forms suggested by the shape and texture of the biblical texts they’re based on. Some sermons are primarily meant to teach. Others to invoke a sense of awe. Still others to ponder.

The sermon form this Sunday is what’s known as a problem/solution sermon. Our problem is temptation, more specifically giving in to temptation. And the sermon will suggest a solution or, more accurately, some strategies to address the problem. As others have said, it’s not so much that we’re punished *for* sins as we are punished *by* our sins. Sinning less seems like a good idea.

After his baptism in chapter three of Luke’s gospel, we read in chapter four. “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where 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.”

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God's Spirit does not make things easy for Jesus. In fact, the Spirit *leads* him into the wilderness, a space typically thought of during that time as place of danger, not a place of rest and renewal. The Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, alone, to face temptation from the devil for forty days. It could be forty days literally or just mean a long time. Either way Jesus eats nothing during this time and at the end he is starving.

Why in the world does God do this to Jesus? We don't know for certain. Maybe Jesus learns to be faithful by being faithful, how to be obedient by being obedient, how to stand against evil by standing against evil. Maybe that's it. We don't know.

But notice three things that should work for the devil's advantage during the temptation.

First, Jesus is alone to face his temptations. Yes, we know there's something to be said for going on retreat all by yourself. Being silent. Enjoying the beauty of creation. Praying. Journaling. Turning off the cellphone. Yeah, that's good sometimes.

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But not always, especially when we're fighting temptation. I think I've mentioned this before. In a church I served in Ohio, they had several AA groups that met in the church's fellowship hall, just as we have an AA group and an NA group that meet in our fellowship hall. People in the groups would sometimes contact me to assist with their fifth step in the AA twelve step program. In the fifth step the alcoholic admits "to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs."

So basically, the fifth step means you fess up, no sugarcoating, no baloney. So people would make an appointment and come to my office. And I would begin by saying to them, "I will keep in confidence what you tell me with two exceptions. One, if you're hurting a child. And two, if you're planning to kill yourself. I will not keep those things in confidence." Then I would say, "Feel free to tell me anything. I've heard practically everything, and you won't shock me."

Well actually I was shocked sometimes. I learned that alcoholism had gotten people fired, destroyed their marriages and families, gotten them put in jail, and reduced some to prostitution. But one of the

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happiest and sweetest women in an AA group was someone I'll call "Cindy." She had not come to me to complete a fifth step. I just knew her from seeing her around the church or at AA anniversary meals to which I was invited. Cindy was 60 or 70 something years old. She wore a gallon of perfume and would give me a giant hug when she ran into me. I'd get home from work and Beth would say, "Saw Cindy today, didn't you?" But Cindy, the story went, had been married to a professional football player. They'd gotten into an argument, and she shot him in the stomach. But after her time in prison was over, the two got back together. And now Cindy was a joyful soul, because she'd gotten a second chance at life. How? Not by facing her temptation and her illness alone. She'd gotten her second chance by coming together with an AA group over and over and over, week after week, year after year.

One of our strategies for temptation is not to try to handle it alone. Sometimes we need to be with other people who can help us. If we have an addiction, a twelve-step program and a good counselor are worth their weight in gold. If we're simply dealing with normal temptations

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that come in life, a good church with worship, small groups, Sunday school, and so on, can make a huge difference. Facing temptation? Get help from others.

But Jesus faced his temptation alone. And he faced it for forty days—when he was hungry and tired.

Here's another strategy for us. Notice when temptation is the hardest to resist. Often, it's when we are lonely, hungry, and tired. This is when we would be wise to be extra vigilant. How do we respond when we're lonely, hungry, and tired? This might be a good time not only to be with others but to get something to eat and to rest. Jesus faced temptation when he was lonely, hungry, and tired, and he was faithful. But you and I are not the Messiah.

Now before we look briefly at the three specific temptations Jesus faced, let's recall our old enemy, Satan or the devil or evil—all names for the same thing.

In the Old Testament, Satan is more like God's prosecuting attorney as he functions in the Book of Job. But by the time we get to the New Testament, the understanding of Satan, the devil, has changed.

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Now, the devil is viewed as the author and instigator of evil. A few things to remember about that.

The devil is God's adversary, powerful, and pervasive. We believe that all of creation is influenced and tainted by evil. And ultimately we human beings are not strong enough on our own to defeat evil completely. Instead, we have to rely on God's power in Jesus Christ to vanquish evil.

The devil is not only powerful but cunning and tricks us. Again and again we chose evil because "it seemed like a good idea at the time." "No one will ever know." "Everybody does it." "It's really not a big deal." "And quit judging me." We get tricked.

The devil is also more powerful than simply the sum of each person's bad traits, evil thoughts and behaviors. The devil's power is exponential like a virus, explosive like a bomb. As the comedian George Carlin noted, "Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups." Indeed, watch a few clips of Nazi rallies and the German people mesmerized by Hitler. Stupid people in large groups who were

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led from stupidity to commit torture, murder, atrocities, evil on a scale we can barely comprehend.

But for all of the devil's power, pervasiveness, and charming deceits, the devil is not God's equal. God is infinitely stronger, as the biblical stories and images show us. And we remember when evil seemed most surely to have won the day in the crucifixion of Jesus, instead Easter showed the awesome power of God's love to bring goodness out of evil and life out of death.

So despite evil's power and destructiveness, like Jesus, we can approach it with confidence that God and God's power are much stronger and will win.

Luke tells us Jesus is tempted by the devil in three ways. First, the starving Jesus is tempted to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. We might call this the temptation to be self-sufficient.

This is also our temptation, isn't it? "I don't need God in my life. I can make it on my own. I'm smart and well-prepared for whatever comes my way." Does that work? Sometimes, for a while. But eventually everybody gets knocked down and broken in this life. We

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build all these great plans and everything gets washed away in a Tsunami. Then maybe we realize we need God, and the words of scripture, and we need God's church to help us. And God and the church welcome us home.

Jesus answers the devil with a quote from scripture, "One does not live by bread alone." And the rest of the statement is, "but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." We're not self-sufficient. We need God and each other.

So the devil tries a second temptation. He takes Jesus on a tour, showing him all the kingdoms of the world. "I'll give you all their glory and authority. If you'll just worship me, it'll all be yours." We might call this the temptation of prestige, wealth, and power.

Again, this is our temptation too. Scan the newspaper or the Internet any day or night, and you'll see persons who decided that prestige, wealth, and power were worth whatever lies and criminality were necessary to get them. And it's amazing to see the people who fall for this, people who *already* had prestige, power, and wealth, but it just wasn't enough.

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Jesus is tempted but not fooled. He quotes the Bible again, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.” Jesus reminds us of our reason for existence, as the catechism says, “to worship God and enjoy God forever.” We know we’re not here on the earth just to accumulate adulation, or power, or money. We’re here to enjoy God, to worship God, to serve God. That’s how we find our purpose and our joy.

Finally, the devil tries one last time. He takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple and says, “If you’re the Son of God, throw yourself down. As it is written, “He will command his angels to protect you. They’ll catch you and you won’t even dash your foot against a stone.” The quote is borrowed from the 91st Psalm we read this morning. So even the devil can quote the Bible when it suits his purpose. And the temptation is to put God to the test, prove that Jesus is who he is by doing something spectacular.

Again, we know this temptation when we need spectacle and show in order for us to trust God. If we’re not properly moved by worship every week or dazzled by the music or filled with excitement each time, then God needs to do a better job with our demands. And if we do

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something foolhardy with our life and God does not bail us out, then God must not be real and God must not be worthy of our trust and obedience.

Jesus is not deceived. He quotes the Bible right back at the devil, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Our life is not to test God but to trust God. Not to demand a high from God but to love God.

The temptations end and Jesus is never deceived. He remains utterly faithful to God and utterly faithful to us.

We begin the season of Lent, a time for introspection and repentance, a time for trying to be more faithful to God. We know evil is powerful, but we have many weapons and shields for our battle. We can pay close attention when we’re lonely, tired, and hungry. Gather with others for comfort, strength, and challenge. Get some rest and some food. Pray and read the Bible with others and when alone. Memorize some scripture. Worship with other Christians. Realize our true need is for God, not prestige, wealth, and power. Recall our purpose in life, to

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love God and enjoy God forever. Let go of our craving for constant excitement and stimulation, and trust God in quietness and peace.

We won't kid ourselves. We're going to win some battles with temptation and lose some battles as well. When we win, we should not gloat, because, as with Jesus, the devil will return at "an opportune time." But when we lose, and fall into sin, we need not despair either. We can simply admit our mistakes to God, ask for and receive forgiveness, and then pray for strength and wisdom to get up and try to be faithful again. This is our life as Christians.

And we live each day with confidence knowing that the final battle between good and evil has already been won for the world and for us, through Christ our crucified and risen Lord. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal