

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth F. Keeler
The First Sunday in Lent (C)
Sunday, March 10, 2019

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 | Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13 | Luke 4:1-13

I imagine you've heard the expression: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." In thinking about today's Gospel let's revise that expression a bit... "The road to hell is paved with seemingly benign temptation. Benign temptation. Something we all face, from cradle to grave, on a daily, even hourly basis.

In Luke's Gospel account we meet up with Jesus, fresh and dripping wet, from the waters of his Baptism, now heading into the wilderness, still being led by the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the devil, and temptation, will all be together, there in the wilderness, for forty days. Forty days is an often-used, and thus important, number in scripture. Noah was in the ark forty days, Moses was on the mountain forty days, and the Israelites, Jesus's ancestors, were in their wilderness for forty years. We, of course, have just entered the season of Lent, our period of forty days. A symbolic wilderness time for us to confront our own devils and temptations – especially our seemingly benign temptations.

But understanding temptation also involves recognizing the one who wields temptation. The Bible describes the devil, the tempter, with many words but the two most consistent are "subtle" and "liar." The one who tempts does so subtly and uses lies. This was certainly Jesus's experience in the wilderness and so it is true for us. The road to the hell, the one the tempter tries to lead us down, is paved with seemingly benign, subtle, white lie kinds of temptation. C.S. Lewis wrote: "The safest road to hell is the gradual one, the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."

Friends, it is so very easy for us to stray off course because the road to hell is not only paved with benign temptation, it is also subtle and gentle and it is so very easy to veer onto. An age-old road that old tempter – still cunningly at work today just as he was in Jesus's day – beckons us to take. And we, far too often, clumsily, casually follow not even aware we have left the surer path. So let's spend a few minutes this morning thinking about temptation, Jesus's and ours, and let's be brave and honest and look at the very nature of temptation and see what answers Jesus calmly defied that old tempter with.

The first thing to say about temptation is that it is attractive – who would be tempted if it weren't! Remember Jesus was fasting for those forty days in the wilderness. He was famished, so his first temptation is simple and oh so attractive: Turn stones into bread. And by wielding this power Jesus could not only relieve his own profound hunger, but also the hunger of many, perhaps even the hunger of the world. Notice Jesus's response and how it might shape our response to the attractive temptations we face. He quotes Moses and answers the tempter: "One does not live by bread alone." And so we too know that the quickest, easiest fix is often not the wisest choice. We know that real satisfaction is often hard won, not cheap or tricky. And for Jesus, bread would surely be good but it is not sufficient to define his mission. Bread alone will not supply what the world needs. Jesus will feed later, on his own terms, turning two loaves of bread and five fish into a meal for five thousand. But he will not do his feeding work for himself alone, in the wilderness, at the goading of the tempter.

The second characteristic of temptation is its subtlety. I mentioned earlier the subtle nature of temptation and here's a simple example: Most of us here will probably never be tempted to harm someone outright, really to hurt someone physically, but we've all been tempted to ignore someone, to be insensitive, to be oblivious or unmoved. You see it's less that we're tempted to do great harm and more that we're tempted to do many slight, subtle harms. Tempted not to great evil, but often to the lesser good. Tempted not to take responsibility or make the harder choice but rather look the other way, turning blind eyes and white lies into casual strolls down the tempter's lane. We shrug our shoulders and say: "Oh, to hell with it, it's too hard, or complicated, or not my problem." To hell indeed – and thus the tempter slowly, subtly reels us in.

The third point we must understand about temptation is that it is prevalent. Temptation is prevalent and no one is immune from it – not you, not me, not Jesus. Today's Gospel reminds us that even being chosen by God does not provide immunity from experiencing trials and tribulations – and thus temptation. The truth is, no matter who we are, or how much we try to insulate ourselves – life is hard, we get hurt. That's just living, that's being human. The temptation is to try and fortify ourselves against our own humanity, and our dependence upon God, with power and money and stuff. But we desperately need God's help to make sense of all life's messiness – because, of course, we're not as in control as we think we are or want to be! Notice how the tempter holds out the promise of authority over "all the kingdoms of the world", immense power and control, to Jesus. If Jesus will just worship him, he promises, "It will all be yours." Jesus, of course refuses, again quoting scripture: "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." Jesus knows that only God can save and he already has a sense of the role he is to play in humanity's salvation.

All of the temptations Jesus faced to abuse his power were serious and compelling. They held the same classic characteristics of temptation that we experience today: attractiveness, subtly and prevalence – they're important for us to notice. Indeed, the influence of Jesus's time in the wilderness can be seen sprinkled throughout his ministry, perhaps most clearly in the foundational prayer he taught his disciples – and the one we still say today. You'll recognize the line: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

And let's finally, remember – Jesus and the devil meet again, down the road a bit, just as the ending of today's Gospel story foreshadows: "The devil departed from him until an opportune time." But that opportune time, that's a story for another day, one that we'll hear about in roughly.... thirty–six days. You'll recognize that story and that day too – it's a Friday, a Friday and a day that we now get to call good. Good because temptation and that old tempter were never any match for Jesus. Amen.