

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer  
February 21, 2010  
Lent 1: Temptation and Trust  
Luke 4:1-13

Our struggles and God's salvation. That's the theme for our Devotional as well as for our six weeks of worship this Lenten season. Our struggles - our challenges, our troubles, those times in our lives when things aren't going so well, those times when we're not sure how things are going to turn out. Our struggles. And God's salvation. The response to our struggle. The way out. It's a dynamic we experience throughout our lives. A struggle followed by a resolution. From sorrow to joy, from despair to hope, from guilt to forgiveness, from sickness to health, from emptiness to fullness, from defeat to victory - however we describe it, and in whatever specific ways it presents itself, we all know this dynamic. We have all faced a struggle of one kind or another, and since we are all still here today, we have all come through a struggle. So that will be our focus these six weeks of Lent. I hope you'll use the Devotional as an additional spiritual resource. The reflections and personal accounts of those you worship with are inspiring, and can be a source of strength and guidance to you as you face your own struggles.

So with that as an introduction, we turn now to today's lesson, to today's look at the struggle of temptation, and to the way out of temptation through trust in God. Let us pray: God our Guide and Guardian, lead us on this journey of faith. Through the days and weeks of Lent, help us walk your path to the cross, strengthen us to resist all that would lead us astray. Walk with us Christ Jesus. Be our shelter and our salvation, even as we seek to be your disciples. Amen.

Every Sunday we say the same words - and after all these years they come automatically to our lips: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil". Lead us not into temptation.

How strange then this gospel story of Jesus in the wilderness. Listen again to the introduction: "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" (Luke 4:1-2a).

He was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil.

Led by the Spirit. Mark's gospel says it even stronger: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness". Matthew puts it like this: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil". So all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, agree that immediately following his baptism during which God identifies him as his beloved Son, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where he faces hunger and weakness and temptation.

Tempted to do what? Not to debase himself, as we usually think of the word. Not to commit some kind of immoral act. Not to pursue some lower form of human pleasure - that isn't what Jesus is tempted with. No, Jesus' temptations have to do with who he is as God's beloved Son and what kind of Messiah he will be. The temptations of Jesus are about identity and mission. About whether or not Jesus will carry out the kind of ministry God has called him to.

Is Jesus an economic liberator? Is he to bring about God's kingdom by turning stones into bread? Is Jesus a political Messiah - liberating the oppressed and ruling the world? Is Jesus a religious hero - bringing people to faith by proving once and for all the power of God to save those who trust in him?

The temptations are real. The need to feed the hungry is real. The need to free the oppressed is real - the need to bring people to faith is real. So these are not ludicrous or frivolous suggestions the tempter makes. And what the tempter offers Jesus isn't too shabby, either: power, glory, fame. He could accomplish a lot of good things if he had everyone on his side like that.

Well, we know how the story turns out. Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit and armed with Scripture, resists these temptations. God did not call him to power and glory. God called him to serve.

What I want us to grasp hold of this morning is how real these temptations were and how possible it could have been for Jesus to go the other way. Nothing had happened yet in Jesus' ministry. He hadn't preached any sermons or performed any miracles. He hadn't called any disciples or healed any lepers. Everything was still in front of him - and the question he had to answer was, whose way was he going to follow? Whose work would he carry out? God's or his own? Jesus knew he was God's Son. Jesus knew the kind of power God had given him. How tempting, therefore, to use his status and power for his own purposes - to do the things he wanted to do, to achieve the kind of success that only the Son of God could achieve! But he resisted the temptation, and he yielded himself to God's authority, and he fulfilled God's purpose for his life.

Jesus was not tempted with things beyond his power. The tempter did not propose outlandish or impossible schemes for Jesus. All the tempter did was suggest Jesus use his God-given power for something other than God intended it. So Jesus was not asked to do something gross or something hideous or something decadent. He was simply asked to manipulate his ministry for his own purposes. He was simply asked to grab for the glory, and forget about the suffering. He was simply asked to bypass Gethsemane's garden and Pilate's judgment hall and Calvary's cross. He was asked to accept the gain with out the pain, and to use coercion instead of love.

Jesus, therefore, was tempted on the basis of his strengths - not his weaknesses. As one biblical scholar says, "We are not tempted to do what we cannot do, but what is within our power". It was within Jesus' power to turn stones into bread, to conquer the nations, and to leap off the Temple's pinnacle without getting

hurt. It was within Jesus' power to do all that he was tempted to do. But he resisted.

It is not in my power to work a multi-million dollar Wall Street scam. I am not tempted to commit insider trading or to make phony stock purchases or any of that high finance stuff. But it is in my power to declare less income than I really earn when I fill out my 1040 tax return.

I suspect most of us here today are not tempted to commit armed robbery or to hot wire an engine and steal a car or blow up a building. I really don't know anything about guns or engines or bombs. It is not in my power to do those things and I am not tempted to do them. But it is in my power to shoot someone down with my words. It is in my power to steal an idea. It is in our power to blow up someone's self-esteem or peace of mind. Harmful criticism, hate-filled anger -what incredible damage the wrong word can do, and each of us must know the power we have to wound and tear down with such a word.

How many of us are tempted to use steroids to win athletic competitions? I'm sure it's not in my power to enter into that level of competition anyway. But it is in our power to use other kinds of shortcuts to get the results we want. We can get hooked on diet pills, we can cheat in school, we can do less than we are capable of at work because we don't feel like giving it the time or effort it needs.

And so on. We are not tempted to do what we cannot do. We are tempted to do what is within our power to do.

It was within Jesus' power to be a different kind of Messiah. The temptation was real - but so was the power to resist it. The Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness of temptation stayed there with him, and because Jesus knew who he was, he was able to resist the temptation to be someone else. Because Jesus knew the kind of Messiah God sent him to be, and because Jesus trusted God to strengthen and care for him, Jesus said no to the tempter, and yes to his ministry as God's suffering servant, as the Messiah of mercy and grace and hope.

In this season of Lent, we are asked to come to terms with who we are as Christians, and to consider what kind of Christians we are meant to be. The particulars are different for each of us, but we all struggle with how to keep our lives as people of faith in balance and in perspective. In one way or another, we are all tempted to put aside the demands and responsibilities of our faith for short-term gains and rewards. Have you ever heard these words of temptation?

"If I give myself more to my job now, If I work extra hard to build up my business now, then in a few years I'll be able to cut back and spend more time with my family, and help more at my church."

"It's okay if I don't take all my vacation this year - it's okay if I don't take my day off - I can get by without it".

“God doesn’t care if I skip out on my prayer time for a few weeks while I get caught up on other things. He’ll still be there when I get back to Him”.

“I’ll make this month’s church pledge next month. The money will still be there, it’s just that I need it for other more important things right now”.

“Nobody will miss me if I don’t go to church. There are enough people there anyway. I can talk to God just as well at home – or at the mall, or while I’m listening to the television. God doesn’t care what day it is. People who go to church aren’t any better than I am”.

The tempter’s voice comes through loud and clear. We’ve all heard it. So did Jesus. He used Scripture and the Holy Spirit to resist. And that’s pretty good advice for us, too. God gives us what we need to be the people of faith he calls us to be. We are not left in the wilderness without the resources or the guidance we need to come out.

There’s a story about an old Cherokee who tells his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He says, “My son, the battle is between two ‘wolves’ inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith”. The grandson thinks about it for a minute and then asks his grandfather, “Which wolf wins?” The grandfather replies, “The one you feed”.

While the gospel story puts it in different terms, the meaning is similar. Jesus knew which one to feed --- and really, so do we. We can’t live on bread alone. We can’t live on human power or glory or fame alone, either. How do we resist the tempter? By feeding on God’s word. By relying on God’s strength. By remembering who we are and what we are called to do as God’s people. By trusting in God more than we trust in things, more than we trust in ourselves. Remember the words of the Psalmist: “You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust’... Those who love me, says the Lord, I will deliver...When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble”. Other shelters we seek aren’t as reliable. Other shadows aren’t as trustworthy. And remember, too, Paul’s instructions to the Romans, “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’....Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”. We already have the word we need to live on, and to live by. Each of us already knows the way out of the wilderness of temptation. Trusting in God isn’t always easy, we know. But it’s not impossible. For we really are given what we need --- to survive in the wilderness, to resist temptation, and to follow Jesus –not just to the healing pool at Bethsaida, or to the mountaintop where he teaches and feeds us, or to the wedding party at Cana where he turns water into wine, or to the sea where he walks to us on the water and calms the storm --- but all the way to the cross. All the way to the cross. That’s the promise we are given on this first Sunday in Lent. Six weeks are in front of us. But we’ll get there. We’ll get there. Because we are not alone. God’s Holy Spirit will guide and sustain us all the way. And God’s Spirit can always be trusted. Yes, indeed. Amen.

