

### **Testing: One, Two, Three (Lent 1 – Feb 25/07 - Gillan Jackson)**

The greatest danger in reading scripture is to read it merely in our own image. Certainly, this kind of reading is important if a lesson from scripture is to be relevant to us today, but sometimes by making everything relevant to us, we miss its deeper importance. Understanding what Luke is saying about temptation and testing is a case in point. There are at least two dangers in dealing with this text.

First, there is a tendency for all of us to so objectify the devil that he (or she?) lurks behind every tree. This devil comes to us in the details, with a red dress on, made me do it, in the Exorcist, lives with Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan. Perhaps it is always easier to see where the devil has been than it is to say where the devil is now. The danger in objectifying the devil is that the devil becomes manageable. The principalities and powers that the devil represents become something that we can either avoid or defeat. This reduces the problem of evil, however, to a matter of mere recognition. If we can see the devil, then we are safe from the devil's wiles.

A second and opposite way to address the problem of the devil is to say that it is a figment of an overactive imagination. This modernistic approach says that basically the Devil does not exist and is made up to answer questions about the nature of human life that cannot be otherwise explained. This explanation reminds me of the story of the salesperson that came to a house with a young boy sitting on the front porch. He asked the boy if his father was home and the boy said yes but that he was very sick. The salesperson said, "He isn't really sick, he just thinks he's sick." The next week the salesperson asked the boy, sitting on the same porch how his father was. The boy replied, "Now he thinks he is dead." Sometimes evil exists no matter how we name it. Neither devising evil as absolutely concrete, nor denying its existence, is particularly helpful in coming to terms with it.

Our lesson from Luke today is a traditional one: the temptation of Jesus. It is used on the first Sunday in Lent each year. Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, which means "spring." The season is a preparation for celebrating Easter. Historically, Lent began as a period of fasting and preparation for baptism by converts and then became a time for penance by all Christians. The First Sunday in Lent describes Jesus' temptation by Satan [or the devil].

We all have a problem with temptation. It is a given in life where human choice is real. Too often we do not appreciate the seductiveness of temptation. We deal with it in one of two ways. We either discount the evil that is in the world by dismissing the power of darkness represented in the scripture by the character of the devil. After all, we are the products of the modern scientific age. So we think that if we have never seen the devil, then the powers that the devil represents are not true.

Likewise, if we paint a picture of the devil as a red-suited character with a pointed tail and a pitchfork, then no one today takes this seriously. Rather, I want to suggest that the Bible tells us that the devil is seductive and subtle. When Genesis describes the serpent, which is a devil-like characterization, the text tells us, "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made" (NRSV, Genesis 3:1). The King James Version uses "subtle" rather than crafty, but the effectiveness of

the descriptions are identical. Part of the danger for human beings is that temptation and the tempter are crafty and subtle. They are seductive.

Notice that Jesus' temptations are all certainly good things. Bread, political power, and proof of God's existence. Bread is good in a hungry world. Jesus having political power would be something to celebrate indeed. To know God's existence beyond faith is certainly a tempting proposition to a world nurtured on the milk of the scientific method. Also notice, however, that Jesus rejects each temptation without hesitation. Why?

Jesus rejects the first temptation, stones to bread, because miracles alone do not feed God's people. Jesus rejects the second temptation, all political power, because to provide real justice to the human family, they must be part of its structure. Jesus rejects the third temptation, putting God to the test, because of all Israel's sins; this was the one, which disappointed God most thoroughly. Jesus understood what Israel often forgot: God alone is God. End of discussion. Period.

The moment that we embark on work that deals with our fellow humans at the core and depths of being where God and sin and holiness are at issue, we become at that same moment subject to countless dangers, interferences, pretenses, and errors that we would have been quite safe from otherwise. So-called "spiritual work" exposes us to spiritual sins. Temptations of the flesh, difficult as they are to resist, are at least easy to detect. Temptations of the spirit usually show up disguised as invitations to virtue. When we are tempted as people, we are tempted at the points of our strength, not at the point of our weakness. So remember these helpful words about the devil: He can tempt, deceive, accuse, and attack us, but he cannot force us to do something against our wills. We cannot truthfully say, "The devil made me do it." All of us can be tempted. I don't know exactly what tempts you. But I bet *you* know. Could be something as simple as a chocolate cheesecake, a calorie and cholesterol-laden delight that calls out seductively from the refrigerator when you're trying to diet. Could be making some creative changes on your income tax return. Could be alcohol or drugs, or a relationship outside of marriage. For a student, it could be procrastination: why not watch TV tonight and study on the bus tomorrow? Could be gossip, spreading a juicy story, whether or not it's true. Or a temptation to get revenge on someone who had done us wrong.

We all face temptations all of the time. As the Irish wit, Oscar Wilde put it, "I can resist anything, except temptation." Yet here we are at the start of Lent, that forty-day period when Christians prepare for Easter. Lent is meant to be a "spring cleaning" for the soul. It's a time for self-discipline and self-denial, of saying "No" to temptation. The work of Lent is repentance, examining our selves carefully enough to figure out what it is we need to keep, what it is we need to change, what it is we need to turn around so that God can be fully present in our lives.

In Luke, we find Jesus, freshly baptized, called, named, claimed and set apart for his very unique ministry in the world. All systems are "GO"—except for Jesus' own soul. He is well aware that death is as certain for him as it is for the rest of us. Jesus is also aware, as every good Jew is, that his life has a unique purpose in the heart and mind of the Almighty One. But that is where his certainty ends—as it does for many of us. There, on the edge of the desert, with the waters of baptism still damp in his curly hair, Jesus continues to be fuzzy, unfocused, unsure of what his ministry—what his life—what his call is all about.

Harold Kushner wrote in *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*: "I believe that it is not dying that people are afraid of. Something else, something more unsettling and more tragic than dying frightens us. We are afraid of never having lived, of coming to the end of our days with the sense that we were never really alive, that we never figured out what life was for" He continues: "...the pursuit of *happiness is the wrong goal*. You don't become happy by pursuing happiness. You become happy by living a life that means something".

A study by Author/Researcher Scott Peck concluded that selflove—the ability to value and care for and admit the importance of the self—is central to celebrating the image of God within us. But, he continues, selflove is different than self-esteem. Insisting that we are important is different than esteeming or valuing everything we do or are. Acknowledging sin and brokenness and confusion—admitting who we are not as well as who we are—is part of loving ourselves. And this selfacceptance of our limitations—this tolerance for our own imperfection—this is what teaches us how to love and accept the imperfect people with whom we share God's world. Jesus' desert sojourn, is, then, a profound act of selflove, for he is valuing himself—and God—enough, to take the time to figure out why he is unique, *and* what it is that he has done that has stood in the way of God's purpose for his life. Yes, Jesus is pausing to wrestle with the temptation to do things his way, instead of God's way. He is facing the truth that if his inevitable death is to mean anything, his life must be lived in a certain way.

But Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, led by the Holy Spirit, willing to listen to the Holy Spirit, knows that the meaning of life cannot be found in quick spectacles or manipulative power. Jesus knows that being the Messiah, the Savior, does not mean doing the work of salvation, the work of wholeness, for other people. Instead being the savior means giving people the encouragement and the power to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. Jesus discovers, by contending with the devil and sending the devil away, that his calling is not to be a superstar, but to be a servant. His ministry is not to wear a crown, but to carry a cross. My friends, this Lenten season let us honestly face our own mortality. Led by the Holy Spirit, let us struggle in the wilderness of our own soul, until we discover God's meaning for our lives. Then go forth and live your liife with JOY. Loving Jesus, Others and Yourself. May it be so, for you and for me. Amen.