

**The first temptations of Christ**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the First Sunday in Lent, March 5, 2017.

*When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. Luke 4:13*

Before beginning his ministry, Jesus is led to the wilderness to gather his inner strengths and resources for his basic training against temptation. He intentionally subjects himself to these tests in preparation for resisting the remarkable power of evil. The traditional site of his temptations is in the desolate and barren wilderness where there is little sign of any life or vegetation. I have been there and the only other place that resembles a moonscape is in the Badlands of South Dakota. It is to this setting that Jesus goes to prepare for combating the power of evil.

I enjoy having an occasional quiet day at home. I have been on silent retreats for a day or two, but to spend a significant amount of time completely alone and far from contact with any other human would be like being placed in solitary confinement. We human beings are social creatures who depend on each other for the survival.

Fasting has practical use as a discipline, not just for the body, but for the mind and spirit as well. If we go too long without nourishment, our resources are depleted and we lose our concentration. Bear in mind that forty days is a Biblical metaphor to mean to a long time. If Jesus had really gone forty days in his famished state, he would certainly have died of starvation. However long it actually was, his first temptation is involves intense hunger.

Jesus' encounter with the power of evil is very real. Whether or not you believe that evil is personified in the devil or Satan, the power of evil is very real and cannot be denied. We only need to read and watch the news each day to see the havoc that evil-minded people reap upon humanity. Note that it only takes adding "d" to the word evil to make it spell devil.

There are those who believe that evil is not real, only imaginary. It is important to know is that evil is most difficult to perceive when it is masked as good intention designed to make us feel secure. People who frequently say "trust me" or "believe me" or "to be honest with you" may not be trustworthy, believable or honest. Realizing that he is in a state of near starvation, Jesus is tempted with the promise of power to turn stones into bread. If he gives into this temptation he could satisfy not only his own hunger but also solve the problem of world hunger. To have the opportunity to feed the world's starving is an example of evil masked as goodness. For Jesus, it is tempting to become an overnight sensation as a hero to oppressed people. People are dying every hour of every day in every place because of malnutrition and lack of food. Rather than a shortage of food the problem is really the lack of the distribution of food to those who need it most. People with evil intent use starving people as objects for their own ends rather than as human beings in crisis. Jesus refuses to become a sensation by countering with the words from Deuteronomy: One does not live by bread alone.

In his next temptation, Jesus goes to a place where he can imagine having authority over all the kingdoms of the world. Of course, this would require submitting to the power of the evil. In such a position of power, Jesus could become the liberator of all those suffering under dictatorships. Though he realizes the power for good he could have, he also knows that it would be at the cost of selling his soul to the power of the evil forces. Again, Jesus draws on the wisdom of Deuteronomy: Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.

His final temptation is to make a spectacle of himself by performing a stunt that will set him apart as a powerful world figure. By being assured that he can jump off the parapet of the temple in Jerusalem and land safely he could prove that he is the Son of God. Such a stunt would catch the attention and imagination of the world and give him a level of prominence he never imagined. All this could come to him if he gives his life over to the forces of evil. It is tempting, but Jesus does not give in. He will not exploit his relationship with God for any purpose. He refuses to mislead by making a sensation of himself for any

reason. Once more he draws from the wisdom of Deuteronomy: Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

The time of testing having passed, Jesus now knows that he has the inner resources to withstand any temptation. He knows that he will have to face similar temptations. There is no sin in being tempted, only in giving in to it that is a cause for sin.

Because he is fully human, Jesus is faced with the same temptations with which you and I are faced. In Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ* people were scandalized that Jesus might have been tempted to avoid his fate and could have lived to marry and raise a family. It would have been a reasonable temptation, but Jesus does not give in because his mission is his life purpose.

The issue here is one of power. Jesus refuses to use power for his own purposes. He refuses to use people for his own advantage. It is only with God's power working in him that he can resist temptation. It is that same power working in us that gives us the strength to resist what we know is wrong. Because he meets the tests and resists powerful temptations, Jesus understands the pressures with which we are confronted.

We spend these forty days of this Lenten season assessing the temptations to which we are subjected. Now is our opportunity to look at our own temptations and where we fail the test. We may participate in pride, hypocrisy and self-indulgence almost before we know it. We may be unaware of taking advantage of others and exploiting them. It is tempting to love things and use people instead of the other way around. There are constant pressures to use people for personal gain or to cheat them out of what is rightfully theirs. If we sometimes find ourselves envying those who are more fortunate than we are, if we heap our anger and pain on others and try to rationalize our behavior it can all be redeemed by accepting God's forgiveness through Christ.

The love that raised Jesus from his death on the cross is greater than the evil powers that lifted him upon it. We can count on that.