

## Lent 1C 2019 Sermon

### *Luke 4:1-13*

*After his baptism, 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. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"*

*Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written,*

*'Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.'"*

*Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,*

*'He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you,'*

*and*

*'On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

*Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

I would guess that most of the time, when we hear the word “temptation,” the images that come to mind are of double fudge chocolate cake, or staying in bed on a Sunday morning rather than going to church (which was especially tempting *this* morning!), or splurging on some luxury item that we know we don’t *really* need. But these are not the things with which the devil tempts Jesus in today’s Gospel. For, as David Lose points out, while we most often think that we are being tempted *toward* something (chocolate fudge, sleeping in, splurging on that luxury item), more often we are being tempted *away* from something – namely our primary relationship with God and our identity in God.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus has fasted for 40 days, and is famished; and the devil suggests that Jesus turn a stone into bread. Now, Fr. John Shea calls this a “good” temptation. “A ‘good temptation,’” he writes, “... must have a semblance of truth about it. It must be attractive enough to be seriously considered. Who can deny that God is concerned about human hunger?”<sup>2</sup> Shouldn’t Jesus’ mission be to provide for the physical needs of people – including his own needs?

But the subtle, seductive temptation here, right as Jesus is about to start his

ministry, is for Jesus to focus his life and ministry solely on providing for the *physical* needs of people – healing and feeding – rather than focusing on their spiritual transformation into wholeness, their true selves, the image and likeness of God.

Yes, God provided manna and quail for the people of Israel to eat in the wilderness, but it didn't change them: they were still the grumbling, self-centered people they had been **before** the manna and quail. “Reliance on God did not make them grateful to [God] and caring of one another,” writes Fr. Shea. “Instead, they became arrogant, *insisting* God serve their physical needs. The people stayed on the physical level of existence and never moved beyond it, dragging God down to the level of slave...

“But God is a reality that speaks to the human heart in order to transform it. This is referred to as ‘not living by bread alone.’ Although Jesus *will* be concerned with feeding the hungry, his [mission] will not be the miraculous provision of food. [Rather,] God’s kingdom will be preached, taught, and lived as a call to conversion. People are *more* than recurrent physical needs. The spiritual relationship to God, to one another, and to the earth is primary. The fact that Jesus refrains from food for forty days suggests he personally knows that ‘one does not live by bread alone.’ Satan’s [temptation that Jesus see his mission as providing for the physical needs of people – turning stones into bread - ] misses the point of human transformation, and so it is rejected.”<sup>4</sup> In the King James translation of the story of Adam and Eve, we read that the serpent is the most “subtle” of all the creatures God has made; and the “good” temptation offered by the devil to Jesus is, indeed, subtle.

Several years ago, when Mike Smith and I met with DeeDee Clement, the Director of Loaves and Fishes, to ask what she thought of the idea of Laundry Love, DeeDee was very excited and supportive. But she said something to us which I have heard her say many times – including right here, in this church. She said, “Yes, Loaves and Fishes gave away 323,000 pounds of food last year. Yes, we gave away over 150,000 pieces of clothing last year. And yes, we sheltered 275 individuals last year and served over 17,000 meals.<sup>5</sup> But that is not, *at our core*, what we are about. We are about walking alongside these people who are lost and hurting and feeling worthless and hopeless and being the transformative love and presence of Christ in their lives.”

Yes, an **essential** part of our mission as Christians *is* to help meet the physical needs of the poor, the hungry, the homeless; we need only read the Letter of James to be reminded of that. But *underneath* those deeds of mercy is the **real** mission: sharing the love and compassion of Christ with those who feel unwanted and worthless and unloved.

Yes, we here at Christ Church have given countless baby blankets to newborns and their families over the years, but *with* those blankets go our written and

unwritten prayers that the recipients know that these gifts convey God's love and ours. Yes, at Laundry Love last month we served 31 guests using 101 washing machines (plus corresponding dryers), with 5 hosts feeding \$413 into the washers and dryers. But even **more** importantly, we brought the love, acceptance, and compassion of Christ to these people.

“The worst thing about being homeless,” one homeless man told me, “is that everywhere you go you know that you are not wanted.” It is our centeredness in God and in God's love that *motivates* our actions to help transform people's lives, and that may well involve feeding, clothing, and providing shelter for them. But the core mission is bringing God's love to people who are beaten down, and praying and working that this love will transform their lives.

The devil next takes Jesus up higher and shows him “all the kingdoms of the world in an instant.” “In other words,” writes Fr. Shea, “he reveals to Jesus the **essence** of these kingdoms, the inner dynamics that make them work. Their power and glory belong to the devil because they work by the devil's power. This power is captured in his names. Satan [in Hebrew] means the accuser. Devil, *diabolus* [in the Greek], means the one who tears things apart, the divider. The kingdoms of the world work by the strategies of accusation and division.”<sup>6</sup>

Now, I don't know about you, but I don't really believe in a red-skinned man with horns, a pitchfork, and a pointy tail. But I **do** believe that there is a voice within each of us that says, “You can't *really* trust God – you have to rely on the structures and powers and government and military force and money and influence in this world, which will protect you and keep you safe and allow you to survive and compete and get a leg up.” If you want to *personify* that interior voice so that it takes the form of a red man with a pointy tail, that's fine by me! The point is, we only have to look around in our world to see that people are vying for power and position and advantage by using accusation and division – *Satan* and *Devil*.

The vision of the coming Messiah which the Jews had held for hundreds of years was that of an earthly king like King David, who would subdue and conquer other nations and bring glory to Israel and Israel's God. But we know that to become an earthly ruler one must play the games of power and influence and trading favors that will get you there and keep you there. This, in essence, is what the devil is telling Jesus when he says, “If you will worship me, sign on to playing my games of accusation and division, it will all be yours.”

And here's the thing: the Church has always interpreted the temptations of Jesus as **truly** temptations – things that he has to struggle with. If he isn't *really* tempted to define his mission as providing for people's physical needs, or becoming the kind of Messiah the Jews had envisioned for centuries – a powerful earthly king who would conquer his enemies and bring glory to his tribe – if Jesus isn't truly tempted by what the devil says, then he is not fully human, not one of

us, as Christian doctrine professes. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses, since he “has been tempted in every way, just as we are.” (Hebrews 4:15)

And, while in *Matthew's* version of the temptation Jesus fasts for 40 days and then is tempted by the devil, in Mark and Luke we are told that Jesus is tempted by the devil for 40 days – a fact that is easy to miss. Jesus' temptation did not consist simply of the conversation recorded in today's Gospel; it was day in, day out for 40 days. Jesus truly WAS tempted to see his mission as providing for people's physical needs; and he truly WAS tempted to be the kind of “Earthly Ruler Messiah” that his fellow Jews had been expecting for hundreds of years.

Yet during those 40 days of tempting by the devil, during which he ate nothing, Jesus' understanding of the kind of Messiah God was calling him and sending him to be was clarified in his own mind and heart. He was not being sent to minister to people only on the level of their physical need; he was sent to transform people's hearts and minds, so that they might become their True Selves, living images and ambassadors of God and God's love.

And he was sent not to be Messiah king of an earthly kingdom, ruled by the techniques of accusation and division, the very names of the devil; he was sent to be a Messiah who would proclaim a different kingdom entirely – the Kingdom of God – ruled by love, compassion, forgiveness, and self-offering.

My friends, the story of the Temptation of Jesus is always read on this First Sunday in Lent because his 40 days in the wilderness is the source and pattern of our 40 days of Lenten observance and practice. I pray that this holy season of Lent might be a time when we, too, can honestly face our temptations, our inner voices telling us, in all sorts of subtle ways, that the only world there is is this physical world, and that our mission is to meet our physical needs and desires and those of others. I pray that this holy season of Lent might be a time when we, too, can honestly face those inner and outer voices telling us, in all sorts of subtle and not-so-subtle ways, that if we are to survive and be safe we must play the games of accusation and division, blaming others for our troubles, pitting our group against their group, polarizing, excluding, working for our own sake and the sake of our own group over and against that of others.

The good news is that we don't walk this journey alone. Christ, who sympathizes with us in our weaknesses and “has been tempted in every way, just as we are,” walks alongside us every step of the way, pointing the way through the subtle temptations of the devil and his kingdom into the kingdom of God.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/03/lent-1-c-identity-theft/>

<sup>2</sup> John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 64

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 16

<sup>4</sup> Shea, *ibid.*, p. 64

<sup>5</sup> Figures taken from Loaves and Fishes web site

<sup>6</sup> Shea, *ibid.*, p. 65