



Temptation and Power

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The First Sunday in Lent ~ March 10, 2019*

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

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| 1 | Those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, *
abide under the shadow of the Almighty. | | lest you dash your foot against a stone. |
| 2 | They shall say to God,
"You are my refuge and my stronghold, *
my God in whom I put my trust." | 13 | You shall tread upon the lion and adder; *
you shall trample the young lion and the serpent
under your feet. |
| 9 | Because you have made God your refuge *
and the Most High your habitation, | 14 | Because you are bound to me in love,
therefore will I deliver you; *
I will protect you, because you know my Name. |
| 10 | There shall no evil happen to you, *
neither shall any plague come near your dwelling. | 15 | You will call upon me, and I will answer you; *
I am with you in trouble;
I will rescue you and bring you honor. |
| 11 | For God will give the angels charge over you, *
to keep you in all your ways. | 16 | With long life will I satisfy you *
and show you my salvation. |
| 12 | They shall bear you in their hands, * | | |

Romans 10:8b-13

"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

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'm sure you've heard the saying, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". This seems to be universally true—except it's not. Because in the story we just heard, one person, Jesus, managed to resist the temptation that absolute power brings. The story begins with Jesus, pushed by the Spirit, heading out into the howling desert. There he will spend 40 days and nights fasting and praying, alone, likely sheltering in a cave—perhaps a foreshadow of the cave that will be his tomb. Of course as Luke tells it, Jesus was not alone the whole time. The devil, the tempter, all that is contrary to the kingdom of God waits until Jesus is weak, then makes a move. Luke does not describe what Jesus saw when the Tempter shows up. Luke doesn't even say if Jesus knew exactly what he was going toe-to-toe with—perhaps the Tempter maintained a clever disguise, even showed up as something that looked familiar to Jesus. But whatever it is that Jesus, sees, hears, or knows, the story that follows is a battle of cosmic proportions.

In his book *Manna and Mercy*, Daniel Erlander imagines the confrontation as one where the tempter is a leadership guru dressed in an Italian suit and leading a Messiah success seminar. The Tempter uses a snappy PowerPoint presentation to commend to Jesus the virtues of Plan A over Plan B. Plan A is an evidence-based approach: to use force, offer impressive displays, promise rewards, engage in political maneuvering, and pull all the levers of power to accomplish God's ends. Plan B boils down to living faithfully, loving vulnerably, suffering hopefully, and then getting killed: trusting in God to make it right. "If you want to succeed as Messiah," the tempter says, "follow Plan A." Three times, Jesus chooses Plan B.

The first round starts when Jesus is seriously hungry, and tired—a sitting duck. Hey, the tempter says, you know what you need, Jesus? A little self care. There is no reason that the Son of God should have to suffer like this. You really should have a feast, but at least have some bread. I mean, God has done this whole making bread in the wilderness thing before, so why not now? You deserve it, Jesus. You're hungry! Of course, this whole encounter is about a lot more than a meal—it is about the question of how Jesus will use the unique power given to him as Son of God. Will he use it for himself? Will he use it to keep from having to suffer as so many other human beings do? The Tempter wants Jesus to believe that he is special, not subject to the limits of being human, which include being hungry, suffering. Since you are special, the Tempter says...And the truth is the Tempter says this not just to Jesus, but to you and to me. Since you have worked so hard, since you have straight A's, since you are in an unhappy marriage...the rules don't apply to you. You can cut corners and do what you need to for yourself.

The second part of this temptation is to see if Jesus can be lured into meeting every human need as it arises—busily changing every stone into bread so there are no hungry people any more. Which sounds like a good thing, and is why it is so tempting, but the problem is that humans need more than simply food for the body. We need food for the soul. We need God. If you will remember, back in Genesis things went off the rails when the humans ate the apple. Here in Luke, things get back on track when Jesus refuses to eat. Jesus will not use his power for himself, and he will not limit that power to the merely material. "The human," he says, quoting Scripture, "The human, (of which I am one as well), does not live by bread alone." Score one for plan B.

Round 2 begins on the top of the mountain, with the Tempter showing Jesus all he could rule, if he just calls the tempter his Abba. The tempter offers Jesus the power of glory and authority: and all it would take for Jesus to have such power is to bow down to him, follow his methods, choose plan A. Perhaps the tempter even whispers to Jesus that if Jesus had such coercive power over the kingdoms of this world, he would really be able to feed the hungry, help the hurting, and share the message of the Gospel: whispers that the good ends would justify the diabolical means. It's a temptation that Jesus' people have often succumbed to: the crusades, the inquisition, massive palaces for Bishops, the enslavement of black and brown people, and a lot of moral manipulation all demonstrate this. It seems we humans often replace love with power—it is easier to control people than to love them. Easier to play at being God than to love God. But love is itself a form of power: perhaps the one power that really is power. And Jesus chooses this power of love over the love of so-called power—refusing to build the Kingdom of God with the devil's tools. He knows who his Abba is. "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.'" Plan B

The last temptation—the "hurl yourself from the top of the Temple" one is the hardest to figure out. Is it about Jesus dazzling the religious establishment so that they worship him? Is it some sort of a wild dare—go on, do something crazy? Or is it the temptation to turn God into a personal bodyguard—and nothing more? What if the temptation here is for Jesus to take his life into his own hands—to act in a way that forces God to respond rather than living a life that is a response to God? The temptation to actively seek proof of God's promise rather than accept it, to use God, rather than to trust God. "Since you are God . . . defy the laws of gravity and save me." What makes this so insidious, beyond the Tempter's use of a Scripture quotation, is that God so often does call

for leaps of faith into the unknown: and yet, as Jeremy Troxler writes, this particular jump wouldn't be so much a leap of faith as a drop of doubt—an act that arises not out of belief, but unbelief: from that insecurity that longs to turn faith into “fact.” In the end, Jesus will accomplish God's work not by provoking a miraculous divine rescue, but through his suffering and passion: less by what he does than by what he allows to be done to him in submission to God's will. He will not seek the cup of suffering, but when it is presented to him, he will drink it. He will not seek death by cross, but when it is laid upon him, he will carry it.

And what about us? While we are not in a cave in the middle of the howling desert, where do we hear the voice of the tempter? Our caves might be our cubicles. A meeting room might be our mountaintops. The tip of the temple might be the pinnacle of our professions. And when the tempter comes to us in those places, it will most likely not be in a dramatic moment of decision, or from an obviously bad person. It may happen (in an email) or sitting alone at the computer, over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine with someone we really like or admire. We will be tempted to use the power of our position for our own comfort. Tempted to protect ourselves rather than the weak and the vulnerable. Tempted to trust in the love of power rather than the power of love.

Power brings temptation. Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

But thank God there was one who, though tempted in every way as we are, was without sin. There was one who was trustworthy enough to be entrusted with the power of God: who had the power to faithfully use power. For, though being in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but instead emptied himself. He lived by more than bread alone. He bowed before God and served only God. He did not put his Lord God to the test. Instead, entitled to wear the purple of a king, he took the form of a slave, and became obedient unto death: even death on a cross. On that cross, the tempter's voice would speak again, this time through a sneering crowd: “You saved others, now save yourself. Since you are the Son of God, leap down from the cross: jump.” But he doesn't come down. Instead he bears and forgives. Only then, from that grotesque pinnacle, will he make the ultimate leap of faith down into the valley of the shadow of death, trusting that he will not dash his foot against a stone: “Abba into your hands, I commend my Spirit.” Plan B.

Three days later, the real power of Plan B is perfectly revealed as Jesus emerges from the cave having passed through the wilderness of temptation, and the wilderness of death. Thanks be to God.