



It's Tempting – TouchPoint for March 13, 2019

Luke 4:1-13 [NRSV] *The Temptation of Jesus*

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.

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

"For forty days he was tempted..."

The Temptation of Jesus story is one of my favorites in the Bible. Yeah, I know, I'm weird. And it's one of my favorites, not so much because of what it says, but because of people's reaction or interpretation of it. You see, I'm one of those people who is fascinated at times, not just by articles I read, but by people's reactions and comments to the article. And that's the situation in this case as well.

It's called the Temptation of Jesus story. And there are two major players in this drama. Just two. Though I suppose you could mention the Holy Spirit that fills Jesus and leads Jesus at the beginning. But for the rest of the drama it's just Jesus and the devil.

Now, I want you to think of other stories about Jesus that we read and how we interpret them. When we read about Jesus healing people, we talk about how Jesus heals us. When we read about Jesus calming a storm, we talk about how Jesus calms the storms of our lives. When we read about Jesus forgiving sins, we talk about how Jesus forgives us. In general, when we talk about stories of Jesus, there is Jesus doing his thing, and we are the ones Jesus is healing, calming, forgiving. We are the ones to whom Jesus is doing something. That's what all the commentators tell us.

Except for this passage. You see, in this passage there is only Jesus and the devil. And if we are not going to be Jesus in this story, it only leaves us one option, and that's an option we don't care for. And so we flip. We become Jesus in this story. We become the one who is tempted. Jesus becomes not one who does something to us, but rather, Jesus becomes our role model. That's what all the commentators tell us.

Now, I'm not against Jesus being a role model. I actually wish people had taken seriously those WWJD bracelets they wore. There would be a lot less hunger and homelessness in the world. I never did see one of them go and sell all they had and give it to the poor. Oh well!

But I want to argue for a little consistency today. So let's not be too quick to equate ourselves with Jesus. We rarely do it with other passages, so why start now? So let's not be too quick to equate ourselves with Jesus. You know, that's probably some good advice, not just for today, but for every day.

I want to argue for a little consistency today. What if we continue in our normal ways of interpretation and say that Jesus is Jesus, and we are the other. If we do, then the question that comes out of this passage is not, "How am I tempted?" But rather, "How do I tempt God?" "How do I tell God who to be and how to act?" "How do I play 'quid pro quo' games with God?"

"God, just do this for me and I will worship you back?" "Jesus, why don't you just turn these stones into bread and feed the world?" Of course, the added bonus is then, that I don't have to feed the world.

We pray, "Why don't you just feed the world, God?" And God replies, "Why don't you?" We pray, "Why don't you just feed the world, God?" And God replies, "I am the hungry, so you feed me."

"God, make me the center of your attention. Worship my goals and dreams. Make them all possible because with you nothing is impossible. Then I will fall down and worship you." And God replies, "For what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose their soul."

"Jesus, do something amazing in your life that will convince others of God's presence?" And again the reply comes back, "Why don't you?"

Let's face it, we are always tempting God. We are always playing games with the Myster, trying to make deals that will get us out of responsibility to our fellow humanity; or make deals that will turn the focus on us and our dreams and goals. But who wants to look at that. I would much rather think of myself like a holy and pure Jesus, who gets tempted by the evil one or those evil ones, over there, out there, beyond me.

But if I am honest with myself. If I am truthful with myself, I know who I'm more like in this story than not. If I am honest with myself, I find myself in much greater agreement with the commentary I once read on the Lord's Prayer and the petition, "Lead us not into temptation."

The commentator wrote, "Lead us not into temptation." What does this mean? *"It means I do not need God to lead me into temptation because I am more than capable of finding it on my own."* And not only am I more than capable of finding it on my own, I am more than capable of transmitting it to others, even to the Divine. I'm more than willing to play the temptation game with others—even God.

In the movie *The End*, Burt Reynolds tries to kill himself by swimming as far out into the ocean as he can. But once he is out there, he decides he wants to live and so he begins to bargain with God, tempt God. "God, if you will let me live I will go to church every Sunday, I'll give 50% of my money away." And he starts swimming back to shore. But as he gets closer to the shore, he changes his tune. "God, if you will let me live, I will attend church once a month, and you can have 10% of my net income." Burt Reynolds, major theologian—who knew.

Think of the prosperity gospel. It is nothing more than a belief system that says you can “Game God.” You can turn the Mystery into a system of rewards. You can control the Divine. That is always our temptation. To turn the Mystery into a system we can master and control. Heck, I spent 4 years and thousands of dollars to get a “**MASTER** of Divinity” degree. I should know.

But here’s the good news: *Jesus does not give into temptation.* But even more importantly, Jesus doesn’t give into MY temptations, OUR temptations. He simply will not play our games. He will not buy into our systems of mastery and control, reward and punishment. He will not be the Messiah as we conceive him. He isn’t interested in our self-indulgence or even his. He isn’t interested in helping us meet **our** impossible goals, but making **his** goal of forgiveness, possible.

He isn’t interested in temptation, but transformation. You can quote scripture to him and he will have none of it. He knows our games and how we will twist words and meanings to get what we want. Quoting Scripture does not make us the final authority. Even the devil can do that. “To Hell with you and your quoting of Scripture,” he basically says. “If you are quoting Scripture to further your own ends and for your own benefit, ‘to Hell with you’. I’ve got more important things to do than fit into your understanding of Scripture.”

And then, when we couldn’t control him with Scripture, when we couldn’t control him with our religiosity and piety, we tried to control him with hammers and nails. Certainly now, he would understand how the game is played. Certainly now, he would understand the rules.

He betrayed our ways of speaking and dealing with the Divine Mystery, so we decided to betray him back. He denied our ways of speaking and dealing with the Divine Mystery, so we denied him back. Certainly the threat of death would change him. And yet, he wouldn’t give in.

Niklos Kazantzakis in his book, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, gives some insight into this. Jesus struggles between what it means to be the Messiah, or what would have happened if he had just lived an ordinary life. A life that accepted and played by all the rules. A life that denied and betrayed nothing of the world and its manipulation of the Divine. It was all very tempting. But Jesus wasn’t interested in temptation, but transformation.

Here is the good news. The Divine will not give in to our temptations to control or manipulate it. Grace, mercy and forgiveness cannot be manipulated and controlled. They are free. They are gift. And they cannot be stopped. Our temptations cannot stop them. Our piety and scripture quoting cannot stop them. Our denials and betrayals cannot stop them. Not even our hammers and nails and death can stop the love, grace, and forgiveness of the Divine.

From the bread and wine of this meal to the pronouncement of forgiveness on the cross, the Mystery reveals what Paul stated so well,

*“For I am convinced that neither life, nor death, nor things past, nor things to come.
Nor powers nor principalities... can stop us from being loved by the Divine Mystery.”*

Amen.