

“Surrounded By Love” 3-5-17

Old Testament Lesson, Psalm 32

New Testament Lesson, Matthew 4:1-11

Temptations are a part of life. Jesus in his humanity was “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are...” Temptation presents us with many faces. It hovers, waiting to take advantage of our pride and ego, our lusts for power, sex, and money. Many succumb to its powers of suggestion, insinuations of doubt, redirection of thoughts, words, and arguments.

The New Testament assumes a real force actively present in the cosmos, urging to evil. A force without a face, it presents a purposive center that hates good and every individual created in God’s image. It urges us to hate good, other people, and ourselves. Cornell University press author Jeffery Burton Russell writes in “Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World, that “The central message of the NT is salvation: Christ saves us. What he saves us from is the power of the Devil. If the power of the Devil is dismissed, then Christ’s mission becomes meaningless” (Brunner, “Matthew”, Vol. 1, p. 121).

I share this extended passage from Hebrews 2:14 -18 expressing this reality: “By embracing death, taking it into himself, he destroyed the Devil’s hold on death and freed all who cower through this life, scared to death of death...That’s why he had to enter into every detail of human life. Then, when he came before God as high priest to get rid of the people’s sins, he would have already experienced it all himself---all the pain, all the testing---and would be able to help where help was needed” (Message).

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil”. God’s Spirit leads often into the experience of blessings but also may lead us into confrontation with bad things. Moses at one point reminded Israel: “Remember how the Lord your God led you...these pasts forty years, sending hardships to test you, so that he might know what you intended to do” (Deuteronomy 8:2). The wilderness, literally and metaphorically, is always a place of testing. As we face our failings and sins, David, facing his own transgressions, did so knowing that “steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord”, inviting us to do the same (Psalm 32:10).

How we deal with and respond to temptations define us. We often experience temptations at the crossroads of our greatest vulnerability and weaknesses. Jesus was hungry, desired to win peoples’ attention and hearts, and was the ruler over the nations. His temptation was to take shortcuts to God’s appointed ends. But in these crisis moments we also discover God’s redemptive power and grace. In a period of great personal torment and weakness Paul experiences God’s grace; “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness”. Deliverance from every temptation and evil that assaults us finds its potential victory within by drawing upon the loving, forgiving power of God to be with us. We trust, as Augustine, that “When I wasn’t with you, Lord, you were with me”.

Excerpts from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s poem, “Who am I?” reflects the inner dialogue with ourselves as we stand in God’s presence. “Who am I? This or the other? Am I one person today and tomorrow another? Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others, and before myself a woebegone weakling? Or is

something within me still a beaten army, fleeing from disorder from victory already achieved? Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!"

Let us observe how Jesus responded to the Devil's temptations and discern what will be helpful as we face our own. The Tempter approaches Jesus at his point of weakness. Fasting for forty days he is hungry. It is when I am most easily depressed, hungry, wounded, or discouraged, that I am most vulnerable. But as J.R.R. Tolkien said, "Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens".

The Tempter sneaks up on Jesus with a question, not denying who he is, but raising doubts as to his identity; "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread". The hunger is legitimate. The means Jesus is tempted to use to gain the bread would be self-serving. The Devil wants to undermine Jesus' trust in the Father to provide. Doubt is often the lever of temptation. That one look and flirtatious banter won't matter. One corner cut won't be noticed. A little lie will protect me. I don't need to trust God. God's not interested, doesn't see. I will take control of what I want and think I need. Isn't it within my power to do so? The reality is, "You will know as much of God, and only as much of God, as you are willing to put into practice" (Eric Liddell).

That is always the central plea. My conscience is a figment. Prayer is projection, God a construct of my mind. Does God really care about me? Am I really a child of God? Am I not the captain of my soul? In Matthew 7:9 Jesus poses the question to us; "Will your heavenly Father give you a stone when you ask him for bread?"

Jesus redirects the question through the lens of scripture. "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God". Unless we ourselves are immersed in Scripture we leave ourselves vulnerable to the seductions of the Tempter. If I don't know what God says, how can I know or respond?

To the Olympic Committee in 1924 who demanded Scottish runner Eric Liddell to run on Sunday for the glory of the United Kingdom, Liddell responds, "God made countries. God makes kings and the rules by which they govern. And these rules say that the Sabbath is His. And I for one want to keep it that way...Compromise is a language of the devil". He knew his scripture and what God asked of him.

The prophet Amos presents a worst case prophetic scenario if God's Word is not known or heard. "The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 6:11). It can be said that if we lose a spiritual sense for the primacy of God's word we also lose a social sense for the urgency of bread. Social service and ministry must be grounded in the Word to be nurtured and sustainable. It is our temptation to separate them and go alone.

The second temptation finds Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple. The Tempter lies in wait for Christ's faithful especially in the sacred places. On that pinnacle Jesus could be seen by the crowds. He could bypass the road of incognito suffering love, be adulated, his ego exalted, and command the attention of

the crowds. Sensationalism impresses people. “Throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you’, and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone’”. Of course, “If you are the Son of God...” underlies the temptation to take a shortcut from servant love to popular manipulation of people to achieve God’s ends.

Holy things dominate in this temptation. Here the Tempter aims at Jesus’ strength. “Perhaps”, as one person framed it, “we sin as often through presuming on our strengths as we do in succumbing to our weaknesses” (Brunner, p.128). High places are slippery places. Advancement in the world makes a person vulnerable when exalted. Those who have gained eminent positions and gained great reputations are challenged to remain humble.

A recent interview with former President Bush with Matt Lauer on the Today Show caught my eye. Taking about the media, Bush responded, “I consider the media indispensable to democracy. We need an independent media to hold people like me to account. Power can be very addictive and it can be corrosive”. This temptation invites us to exalt ourselves and not God, to forget Jesus’ word that “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39).

The whole gospel of Matthew teaches Jesus’ repugnance for spectacles and the spectacular. He eschewed signs and wonders and stressed that “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matthew 23:11-12). The question in all we do may be posed this way, “Do we follow God or must God follow us?” To the Tempter Jesus replied, “Do not put God to the test”.

The final temptation finds Jesus on a high mountain overlooking the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. That, of course, is God’s destiny for him, articulated in Revelation 11:15 and other places; “The Kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and Messiah”. Worship me, the Tempter says, and all this is yours, immediately! No shortcuts for Jesus, however; “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’”.

Jesus’ work is to win the world, but not the world’s way. He moves not with the ways of the world to do God’s work but is found down among the ordinary and mundane, identifying with fallen humanity into the way of suffering and the cross. The temptation is to do God’s work our way via success and power and influence. So we must always distinguish our work from God. Let us remember that our spiritual warfare is with a defeated devil. Why? Because we are in the company of a Christ who conquers through the self-sacrifice of a suffering servant love.

Through temptations in life the Tempter seeks to pull us away from God and our true selves. He would pull our hearts from the heart of God, separating us from him and others. But as we resist the Tempter, God’s love surrounds us and our experience in the end will be like Jesus; “Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him”. That’s what God’s love does.

