

“Temptation”

Years ago, when I was just out of college, I worked in Colonial Williamsburg as an historical interpreter. I was trained to give tours through four buildings in the historic area—The Raleigh Tavern, Wetherburn’s Tavern, the Gaol, and the Peyton Randolph House. I worked in costume, although there were slight differences according to the location. We were all trained with the same set of facts about the locations, but we were expected to come up with our own talk. Not only that, but we were expected not to give the same talk each time. We were supposed to keep the tours interesting and fresh so that we did not become drones. We were also expected to engage the visitors in conversations. We were to get them to ask questions rather than become drones themselves. Engagement made the tour lively, got across information, and was entertaining. It might be the tenth time that day I had taken a group through the building, but it was their first and only time they would visit such a place. We needed to make it a memorable experience.

In contrast, I bet that we all know today’s gospel story. We have heard it so often that some of us might be able to recite it. Jesus, having been baptized, is driven by the Holy Spirit into the Judean desert or wilderness. There he spends “forty days and forty nights” fasting and praying. At the end of the forty days, the Devil comes to tempt him with food, notoriety, and power. Jesus, being God’s anointed, does not give in. The Devil disappears, and Angels arrive to take care of Jesus, further affirming for us that he is God’s son. All’s well that ends well. Now, Jesus can start his ministry. But this story, with a little background, becomes not only fresh but more powerful.

Jesus sojourned in the wilderness for forty days. That is a long time to go without food and water. In fact, a human being cannot live without water for more than three days and without food for thirty days. One might think that, like a fish story, through repeated tellings, Jesus’ time in the desert got longer and longer. While that is possible, what is more likely is that forty is a significant number. Noah and company endured forty days and forty nights of rain on the ark. As we heard last week, Moses went up Mount Sinai for forty days, where he talked with God. After that, Moses and the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness for forty years. In the Bible, forty signifies an encounter with God. Specifically, forty signifies when God is testing a person or a group. Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness is less about actual days and more about Jesus’ faith being tested. Don’t take forty literally; see it as a sign of testing.

When the time in the wilderness is over, Jesus undergoes another test of his faith. In this instance, it is the temptation of the Devil. Satan tests Jesus’ physical needs, spiritual fortitude, and resistance to power. Satan quotes scripture to give credence to his temptations. However, in response to each temptation, Jesus quotes a passage from Deuteronomy. Jesus gives us the example of an appropriate response to testing. He understands and trusts that God will supply his needs, keep him safe, and provide him with strength. Satan’s lures are meaningless compared to what God offers.

Also, as we discussed last week, one of Matthew’s goals in his gospel is to make us think of Jesus as the new Moses. The book of Deuteronomy is called Moses’ valedictory speech. When Matthew shows us Jesus quoting Deuteronomy, we once again think of Moses. When the wandering Hebrews were tested, they came up wanting because they had trouble trusting God. In contrast, Jesus trusts God. Additionally, Jesus also puts God to the test the way the Hebrews do.

Another connection with the Exodus is showing us that Jesus is a great leader like Moses. Matthew wants us to identify Jesus with the first great prophet who leads his people out of exile, saves them from an oppressor, and brings them into a close relationship with God. These are all

intended to give Jesus a specific image as savior and to give each of his actions a raised platform. He is not just another Moses; he stands on Moses' shoulders as a new and different savior. He can do all that Moses did and more.

This story sets Jesus in a different light. All the healing, teaching, and preaching that Jesus does after the wilderness event is not about proving his messiahship, which has already happened in this passage. As the gospel develops, we are further astounded by Jesus's wisdom and power. We are also confounded by how the religious elites stubbornly resist Jesus' preaching and healing. We wonder why they refuse to believe, and why the religious leaders are determined to kill him. In its context, the story can confound us.

The temptation story has another meaning for us in the present. We are tempted every day. If I am abstaining from something for Lent, the temptations can be particularly hard. Temptations come so quickly that we do not know where one ends and another begins. Sometimes we can identify and stop before giving in to a temptation. Other times, we are too worn down to resist. Other times, we do not even recognize that we are being tempted.

In C. S. Lewis' wonderful book, *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape and his pupil Wormwood seek to overcome a human through self-absorption, pettiness, and false piety. Wormwood draws his human subject into a world that feeds his ego through "pride, vanity, selfishness, and apathy."¹ It is very clever and not unlike the temptations that we face daily.

If we look back over our days, we can identify the temptations and our responses. We can see where we have responded well and where we have given in. It is challenging work, perhaps even harder than Jesus coming up with biblical responses for all the Devil's scriptural justifications for the temptations, but this is the work of Lent.

Spiritual advisors often recommend that we make a list of blessings at the end of each day. It is good to remember how God blesses us, but it can create a sense of entitlement. Let us also make a list of how we have fallen short. Remembering our blessings and our trials helps create a balance within ourselves. It helps us remember to whom we belong and to whom our gratitude is to be directed. Otherwise, we may become self-satisfied, self-congratulatory, and end up wandering down the path that led the fallen angels out of heaven and into opposition to God.

Let us make it a habit to examine our lives for temptations that drop by drop can transform us into a caricature of a Christian. Let us recall our God in heaven, in whom "we live and move and have our being." The same God who sent Jesus, as the Word made flesh, to guide us on our earthly pilgrimage. The same one who blesses us each day, and who also asks us to share those blessings with others as Jesus did. Receiving a blessing is as much a test as being tempted. If we hold our blessings close instead of passing them on, we are slipping just as Screwtape wants us to. We are to share our blessings, knowing that God has more in store. We do not need to hoard them, because God will bless us in ways that we can neither ask nor imagine.

¹ Maryetta Anschutz, in *Feasting on the Word* Year A, Volume 2, page 48.