



First Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2010
The Rev. Douglas E. Remer

Luke's story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, which we heard as the Gospel reading just now [Luke 4:1-13], immediately follows the story of his baptism in the River Jordan at the hands of his cousin, John. As soon as Jesus emerges from the waters, Luke tells us, "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" [Luke 3:21b-22] Then come the temptations, in a scenario that is probably all too familiar to most of us. The truth, you see, is that so often we no sooner feel ourselves affirmed, accepted, and empowered by God than the legions of evil come knocking at our door, baiting us, beckoning us, tempting us to be something other than that person with whom God is well pleased.

That was Jesus' experience and it is our experience as well. It is not coincidental that Jesus' temptations follow his baptism. That is a scene that is repeated throughout all of life: the highs and the lows, the hills and the valleys, the triumphs and failures of life are all of a piece. They define each other and, in fact, you can't have one without the other.

In Jesus' case, that empowerment came with his baptism and with God's spoken embrace. You have probably experienced something at least somewhat similar to that in your own life: some time, some event, some circumstance that allowed you to see yourself as God's child, loved and affirmed. You felt uplifted. You knew you were on the right track, you knew you had made some good decisions, and you were resolved to continue on that path your whole life long. Those are the times that sustain us and give us hope. Those are the occasions when God is able to break through our defenses and our pretenses, and we are able to hear him clearly: "You are my child and with you I am well pleased."

And then, invariably and predictably, come the temptations—the tough times, the times that test your spirit and threaten your soul. They are the times, so often disguised by their seductive appearance, that beguile us into believing that maybe, just maybe, they are really not so bad after all. Deception is their substance. Temptations, at their core, are always the same: they will wear any guise except that of truth. Clothed in falsehood, temptations draw us away from our true selves—those selves whom God has created and affirmed—and tease us with an attractive appearance of goodness that hides a hideous essence of evil. Temptations always bid us to be people other than God's people. Temptations always invite us to enjoy some short-term satisfaction at the expense of a greater long-term joy. Temptations tantalize us even as they destroy us.

Consider what confronted Jesus. He was famished, having fasted for forty days, and the devil taunts him, saying, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” How easy it would have been to do that! And yet how dangerous, for Jesus knew that the devil was really mocking and provoking him. Then comes the temptation of earthly rule, the devil’s offer to hand over all the kingdoms of the world. To have those kingdoms in his grasp would have allowed Jesus to right every wrong committed by human rule and authority. All he had to do was worship the devil. Maybe just once. Maybe just a little bit. But even that, Jesus knew, would destroy his integrity as the Son of God and cast him as the son of perniciousness. Finally, the devil moves to drive a wedge between Jesus and the Father by bidding Jesus to call on God’s angels. But Jesus knew that the angels of God are called to do the work of God, not the work of the devil.

Yes, Jesus knew the seductiveness of temptation. The heart of Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, the love of Jesus drew him to those whose needs were the greatest: the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the lame, the hungry, the sorrowful and the sinful. Jesus wept. And when he was able—when God’s plan called for it—he could meet those needs. He could raise from the dead his friend, Lazarus. He could cure a leper. He could cast out demons. But those godly acts of healing were but a small part of the work that God had given Jesus to do, and the temptation that he always faced was to allow those acts to overtake and preclude God’s greater call to him. He could have ruled all the kingdoms of the earth, and by that rule he could have banished all illness and all evil from every human life. But to do so would have been to sell himself to the devil. Jesus knew that his work was not to rule this world, but to herald the world to come.

It is a wise man who knows his work in life. And it is a wiser man still who knows what he can do and what he can’t do, what bodes well and what bodes ill. Jesus overcame every temptation that confronted him because he never lost sight of the truth of who he was and what he was called by God to do. That proclamation from God at his baptism—“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”—rang in his ears always as God’s clarion of truth.

And then, of course, there are the rest of us. We, too, want to hear God’s clarion in our own ears. We want to remember God’s call to us in our own baptisms. We want to serve God unswervingly in our own lives. In short, we want to be just like Jesus. But we can’t be just like Jesus. More important, God does not call us to be just like Jesus. He calls us to follow Jesus, not to be Jesus. And therein is the essential difference between how we will overcome temptation in life and how Jesus overcame temptation in life. We will sometimes fail. Jesus did not. And to know that difference is, at last, to overcome the greatest of all temptations: the temptation to pretend that we are God.

So let Jesus be Jesus. And you be you. No, your temptations will be no less real than his were. And no, too, you will never overcome them all. Only Jesus can do that. The good news is that he did that in his own life—and that he can do it in your life, too.

Amen.

This sermon was preached by the Reverend Douglas E. Remer in Saint John’s Church, Tampa, Florida, on the First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2010.