

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

1-Narrative Lectionary Week 20 - Tempted in the Wilderness

20 January 2019

Matthew 4:1-17

Salem, Bridgeport

“The Secret to Overcoming Temptation”

Last week we heard the story of Jesus’ baptism and how it changed his life.

Having been thrust down into the water by John,

Jesus emerged to discover that his life had been changed.

He saw the heavens opened, experienced the Holy Spirit descend upon him,

and heard God proclaim that he, Jesus, was God’s own beloved Child,

and that God was pleased with him!

After 30 years of preparation, it was time to answer God’s call and begin his ministry.

But instead of putting him right to work, the Spirit leads him from water to desert,

to a place where he can spend time – a long time –

preparing himself spiritually for the work ahead – preparing by fasting and by prayer.

Apparently the 40 days go okay, but at the end of them, just when he should be home free,

the devil shows up to tempt Jesus in 3 ways.

by suggesting he turn stones into bread,

that he throw himself off the parapet of the temple to see if God will save him,

and by promising him the world in return for worship.

I don’t know about you,

but I’ve always had difficulty in figuring out the logic of those 3 temptations.

One writer suggests that the first is about relationship to creation,

the second relationship to God,

and the third, relationship to others.

Another suggests that the first temptation is physical,

the second emotional,

and the third social.

But for me they are about the ordering of our lives,

understanding that we are not isolated individuals living only for ourselves

but that we are called to live in right relationship with God

and right relationship with one another.

The first temptation story is simply about selfish human needs and desires.

I don't know about you, but I don't like being uncomfortable –
and I'm blessed that I don't have to be.

If I'm hungry, I don't wait until the next meal.

I go to the refrigerator or the kitchen cupboard,

or if I'm at work, I open up my top right drawer and pull out a chocolate bar.

If I'm cold, I put on a sweater or up the thermostat.

If I'm tired at the end of the day, I go to bed.

If I don't have to get up early, I sleep in.

If I run out of some needed supplies, I run to the store to purchase replacements.

It wasn't always this way.

Even when I was growing up,

there were many things that we wanted that we had to wait a long time for.

If you wanted a new dress or a new baseball bat,

you had to wait until your birthday or Christmas.

Now it seems it's really difficult to shop for loved ones

because they already have whatever they need.

But many of us in this country today are so used to having our basic needs met
that we don't know or don't remember what it's like to be uncomfortable.

And then I think, we begin to expect that we should never be uncomfortable,
and that whatever we want we should get – right away.

And we get impatient in every arena of our lives –

wanting every problem to be solved right now,

every need to be met right now,

every desire to be fulfilled right now.

Our lives become focused inwardly upon ourselves,

so that we forget what it's like to be hungry, or cold, or tired, or poor,

and we forget what it's like to have to wait.

But in this first temptation story,

Jesus shows us that it's not about being focused on what we want,

or about ending our discomfort,

or about satisfying our immediate needs and desires,

but rather it's about allowing ourselves to live

in that uncomfortable place of hunger and need and desire

until we are able to focus our minds on what God wants

and put God's desires before our own.

When we look at that first temptation in this way, I think it explains the second temptation, for when we are living in a place of need, a place of hunger, a place of discomfort, it's easy to think that God has abandoned us, that God has forgotten us, that God no longer cares about us, and we find ourselves doing things to get God's attention, acting in ways that will force God's hand and cause God to do something to prove that we are still loved.

The first temptation—the “command these stones to become bread” one — is the temptation to act solely for ourselves, with no thought at all to God. but the second temptation—the “do whatever you want & trust God to have your back” one— is the temptation to act in a way that includes God but relegates God to the position of servant. This is the temptation in which we do whatever we want and expect God to bless our efforts, whether or not it's what God wants, and whether or not it's even a good idea. This is the temptation we can see more easily in other people's lives than in our own — when we hear someone complaining that God is allowing them to suffer ill health when we can name 5 things that they are doing that contribute to their health problems, or when we hear someone complaining that God hasn't helped them find a job when they've turned down the last 3 they were offered.

In this second temptation story, Jesus shows us that to make the right decisions in life, we need to be in right relationship with God — and that means that we need to do not what we want but what God wants. When we do what we want rather than what God wants, it's like throwing ourselves off of a building. We'd better be prepared to hit the ground, because it's unlikely God is going to be there to catch us. But when we do what God wants, then we can have perfect trust that God will be there. It doesn't always mean that we won't hit the ground, or get hurt, or even die — but God will be there, either to keep us from hitting the ground, or picking us up afterwards, healing our hurts, and even bringing us back from death to life.

So while the first temptation story reminds us that it's not all about us, the second temptation story reminds us that it's God and how we are to relate to God and the third temptation story reminds us that it's also about other people and how we are to relate to them.

This third temptation is about having power and control over others,
 something that would have been very easy for Jesus to do,
 and something that he actually had a right to do.
 But Jesus knew that the way to live in God's kingdom
 is not by exerting power and control but by becoming a servant.

In these three temptations,

Jesus faced what we are all faced with each and every day of our lives.

Will we live self-centeredly, focused only on
 what makes us happy
 and what makes us comfortable,
 and what meets our needs & desires?

Or will we live our lives focused outwardly on God and on neighbor?

Will we expect God to conform to our desires and needs and plans?

Or will we conform ourselves to God's desires and needs and plans?

Will we try to exert our will over others?

Or will we act in love putting others' needs above our own?

The temptations are many, and while the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak.

But Jesus was 100% human – as human as you and I –

and with God's Word and the power of the Spirit he overcame each and every one.

From Jesus we learn that it's not all about us
 and that we need to let God be God
 and we need to love others as ourselves.

In other words, the way we combat temptation is simple.

We combat it with love,

for when we love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength,
 and when we love our neighbors as ourselves,

temptations will be vanquished, tests will be passed, and trials will be overcome.

May you know that you are God's beloved.

And may God's love fill your hearts

and overflow in all that you think and say and do. **Amen**