

sermon-2/21/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“The Most Important Temptation”
Luke 4:1-13

We begin Lent this year with the story of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. These temptations come right on the heels of his baptism. This was a critical moment in Jesus’ life. He has just had a very powerful spiritual experience at his baptism. According to Luke the voice he heard when he came out of the Jordan was spoken only to him, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This was not a general announcement. It was a private spiritual experience. It may have been the moment he sensed his call from God to be God’s son in a unique way.

Now he has to figure out how he is going to live out that call. What kind of son is he going to be? What should he do to get people’s attention? What needs to be changed so that people will be receptive to his message?

Lord knows there was a whole host of problems in his world. Rome was an oppressive occupier. Food was in short supply for many in Israel. Even their religion had become so distorted by those in power that it ceased to be a source of comfort or liberation.

Given that context, Luke says the Spirit of God led Jesus into the wilderness, into a place where he might be alone without the distractions of other people or the comforts of village life. He is there for forty days, which is the Bible’s way of saying a long time. He fasted during that time and Luke, with one of the greatest understatements in his gospel says, after going without food for forty days, “he was famished.” No kidding!

In this clear-eyed, but weakened state, Jesus is tempted by the devil. Note this tempter is very clever. “**If** you are the son of God...” begins the first and third temptations. Did you really hear God correctly? Are you sure you have this special calling? Maybe it is just wishful thinking. How did you know it was God’s voice and not just your own inflated ego? Everyone has those fleeting moments of seeming clarity, but you aren’t going to act on them are you?

It is touching to know that Jesus must have wrestled with some self-doubt, must have had some second thoughts about his calling. But the tempter does not stop there. The three temptations urge Jesus to do some good things. It would be great to feed the hungry by changing a stone into bread. Jesus could even start with himself! It would be great to have a benign dictator like Jesus to rule the world. It would be great to get people’s attention by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple and not be hurt. They would surely listen to him then.

These temptations are really temptations to settle for the good and not the best. They were temptations to take the easy way rather than to do the hard work of being faithful to God’s call in his life. It is much easier to reject temptations to do something selfish, to give up on God, to settle for what would make one popular. It is much harder to say no to good things so as to not settle for something less than the best.

Finally, note, the tempter even uses scripture to tempt Jesus. This ought to remind us that scripture is a two-edged sword. One can use scripture to prove almost any point, to justify almost any behavior. Beware of folks who use scripture to back their own prejudices!

We could go on and on talking about this moment in Jesus' life. The more interesting discussion concerns figuring out what this has to do with us. This text is helping us see our identities are most clearly defined by how we deal with temptation.

We can begin that discussion with a simple little question: what tempts you? What are you tempted to give your best energies to that ends up defining who you are? We can use the three temptations Jesus faced to explore that question. In doing so we will see to talk about temptation is to begin to meddle in our inner lives where we are most vulnerable. This can be messy and uncomfortable!

The temptation to turn a stone to bread is the temptation to act as if the physical trumps the spiritual when it comes to our identities. While we would never admit to this, many of us, if not most, live as if we are defined by our physical bodies. Our culture is obsessed by a narrow definition of beauty. Many spend huge amounts of money on their looks whether it is botox treatments, liposuction, implants, frivolous plastic surgery, you name it.

I saw a news program this past week where some women are getting shots in the balls of their feet to give them extra padding so they can wear high heel shoes. They know those shoes are not easy on their feet, but they make their legs look great. Why not mess with what God has given them?

Behind this obsession with the physical is our effort to deny the reality of death. We so much want to look younger than we are. We will do almost anything to foster that illusion. That is why I love Ash Wednesday. We are reminded we are all going to die. That service says to us, quit holding on to the illusion of living forever or trying to look like we can live forever.

Letting the physical trump the spiritual has implications beyond just trying to have beautiful bodies. Many of us who are over 55 end up letting health issues define us. We obsess about our health, those nagging limitations that come with aging. Believe me, I struggle with that as much as anyone.

Jesus said we don't live by bread alone. We are not defined by our bodies, our physical limitations, our finances, by having all our needs met. We are defined, first and foremost, by our relationship with that mysterious reality at the center of creation we call God. While that may seem to be an obvious affirmation, it probably has not sunk in fully. Just look and see where we spend our best energies. That is probably a better indication of what is truly important to us and what drives our self-identity.

Next Jesus was tempted to be ruler of the universe if he would only worship the devil. This reminds us that power issues get us into idolatry. Most of us, of course, will not be tempted to be the ruler of the universe. Some may act like they are the ruler of the universe, but that is not our biggest temptation. Instead, we all face the temptation to want to be in control. We want to rule our little corner of the universe.

This affects even our religion. We want to have absolute answers to questions that defy any answer. If we know the answer, then we can be in control. That leads to idolatry, to giving certain ideas the place in our hearts that only God should occupy. That is true whether it is a beloved doctrine of faith, our interpretation of the Bible, or even our own faith tradition. Even Christianity can be an idol if it is seen as the only way God can communicate with humanity.

Finally, Jesus was tempted to test God by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple so that God could save him. That deals with the temptation to want God at our beck and call so that we will be safe. We are tempted to want a safety net under us so that there will be no price to pay for taking chances with our faith. Or we want God to step in and do what we want when we want it. Cure our family member or friend who is sick. Make our spiritual journey easy. Why can't God make our lives less complicated, less painful? Why do good people have to suffer?

Jesus rejected all those temptations. He said his being Son of God was about more than meeting people's physical needs. He said worshipping God was more important than being in control or having power. And he said he would trust God without needing to put God to the test. He did not demand to have God at his beck and call saving him when life got tough, saving him from the cross even.

Jesus was able to do this because he knew his scriptures. Notice how he quotes scripture against the tempter. Where does scripture fit into our lives when temptations come? Do we even know it well enough for it to be a resource? I am not talking about quoting Bible verses at those who are suffering. I am not talking about using the Bible in a wooden, literal way, or seeing it as an answer book. I am suggesting that the stories in the Bible can help us better understand ourselves. Those stories can help us understand the terrain of the inner journey we are all on.

My guess would be there are other things that would be helpful to us as we try to figure out who we are and deal with the temptations to settle for less. Having a quiet heart where God's voice has a chance to get through all the noise that takes over our inner dialogues would be a good thing. Coming to the Taize worship services on Wednesday nights is one way to foster quiet hearts. Valuing mystery and having the humility to accept we will not have all our questions answered plays a significant part in avoiding idolatry.

This work to understand our identities and be faithful to God's call in our lives is noble work. It is part of the work we are invited to do every Lent. I invite you to enter into that work this Lent with your whole hearts. And when Lent is over, we can gather at the empty tomb and celebrate. Amen