

Sunday, February 14, 2016
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 3:1-12

Temptation

Last Sunday after worship, Eleanor, and her mother, Eleanor, were changing the paraments, these cloth hangings on the pulpit and the altar, which are part of the church's seasonal decorations. As we've not entered a new season of the church year, Lent, they were changing the hangings to the color for Lent: purple. We were admiring the purple, what a beautiful hue it is, and I was reminded of a purple and a Lent at a congregation I served prior to coming here. For Lenten worship one year we had a special display board up at the front of the sanctuary. The display board was purely functional, built out of plywood, but still we thought it would look better if we painted it. It being Lent, we thought: purple. We got a bunch of purple paint charts, those sample strips with all the various shades with all their vividly different names, and we consulted an artist in the congregation. She held them up next to the church's stained glass windows, which had some purple in them, and then said, decisively, "This one." We looked at the name of that particular purple hue: "Temptation."

Well of course we had to go with that, for Lent is about temptation, about resisting temptation, right? Lent is about abstaining, it's about fasting, about holding fast against things that would tempt you. Resisting temptation is such a part of Lent that on the first Sunday of Lent, the gospel reading every year, whether it be from Luke or Mark or Matthew, every year on the first Sunday of Lent the gospel reading is the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

Well it just so happens that this year, the first Sunday in Lent also happens to be Valentine's Day. Just an odd quirk of two calendars, but an odd pairing, it would seem: Lent One, and Valentines Day. Fasting, and the perfect dinner date. Abstinence and ...

I do think I've heard of a chocolate candy called Temptation. Perhaps today you could have one of those, unless you gave up chocolate for Lent.

Lent's first Sunday begins with Jesus resisting temptation, three temptations—and many more, Luke's gospel says, those three were just at the end of his time in the wilderness. As the introductory sentence notes, Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days (that's one of the reasons we have 40 days of Lent). Jesus is out in the wilderness for 40 days, fasting (that's one of the reasons many people fast from things during Lent). Jesus is out there in the wilderness for 40 days fasting, and during all of that time, the gospel says, he was being tempted.

That's a lot of temptation. And then there are these final three temptations, which are described in more particular and conversational detail, in a dialogue with the Devil. In the first, Jesus is tempted to make stones become bread. In the next, Jesus is tempted to worship the Devil. And in the third and final one, Jesus is tempted to throw himself off the heights of the Temple, to see if angels will catch him. Three ultimate temptations: to make bread, to worship Satan, and to jump off a building.

These are weird temptations. Not like chocolate, or someone else's spouse. The weirdness of these temptations, and the way they are told, this "If you are the Son of God... then do this..." almost sounds like a dare. It might be tempting to simply write this story off. What does it have to do with my life? What does it have to say to the wilderness I am in? How can it help me get through the next 40 days? Or just today?

One answer is: it won't. This story is not about you. This story is not about what you face. It's about Jesus, it's about what Jesus faced. This gospel is about how when Jesus was tempted, he overcame it. We find these temptations weird? Well, we're not the Son of God.

That is one thing this story says, emphatically, that Jesus is. Jesus shows that he is the Son of God by what he faces, and by the way he responds—by what he overcomes. The Devil says, "If you are the Son of God... then do this..." Jesus says, "Yes I am," and "No I won't." Regarding that first temptation, stones into bread: as God's Son, Jesus has the power to make stones into bread, but Jesus would rather be hungry than use his power in that way. Jesus does not use power for simplistic, short term, self-satisfaction. Regarding that second temptation, worshiping Satan: Jesus could be acclaimed by everyone, everywhere on earth; Jesus could enter and win an earthly popularity contest, but that would mean giving his allegiance to earthly values, that would mean bowing to baser standards, and Jesus is committed to a higher principle, to a glory yet unseen. Regarding that third temptation, jumping off the Temple heights: Jesus could fall back into a security that is promised in holy scripture—the devil himself points that out, quotes a psalm—angels will bear you up, lest your foot be dashed upon a stone. How lovely the psalm, that song. Jesus knows it, too—way better than the Devil. Jesus knows that quoting scripture is not the same thing as understanding it. Jesus tells the Devil, "Quit trying to sing that song; you're butchering it."

Jesus is secure. Jesus is secure, not because he has angels, waiting, for his signal. That's not the point. Jesus is secure, not because he does not hunger, not because he needs the world's acclaim, not because he'll never encounter bodily harm—he will. We'll hear about this, in less than forty days. We'll hear how he'll again experience hunger, and thirst, we'll hear Jesus say, "I thirst." We'll hear how the crowds will deride him, condemn him, we'll hear them yell, "Crucify him!" We'll hear how he'll suffer the extremes of bodily harm. We'll hear about this, when we hear another Lenten gospel story, one which features purple: a purple robe that will be wrapped around Jesus' tortured shoulders, and then stripped off again when he is nailed, naked, to a cross.

Facing all of that, still Jesus is secure. Jesus is secure against temptation, because he knows who he is, and who to trust. He is the Son of God, and he trusts his Father, and—and—he is filled with the Holy Spirit. That's part of that introductory sentence to today's temptation story, too—"Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for 40 days he was tempted."

We are not the Son of God, but we are filled with the Holy Spirit. Here's the way this story is for us, too—is about us, too. We too are filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus promised it to us, just before he died. Jesus gives us that same Spirit of God, the Spirit that has been hovering over earth's waters since the beginning of time, which is given to us in the waters of baptism. That same Spirit fills us, as we join together here in psalm and song. That same Spirit is strengthened in us as we are fed, with bread, here. Filled with Holy Spirit, we can face temptation, too. We will face temptations, too—we know they don't end when Lent does. Ours are not the temptations Jesus faced. But because he faced them, because he overcame them, we can overcome the ones we face, too. He gives us the Spirit, the power, to do so. That's what Jesus does with his power. He gives it over, to us, out of love.

This first Sunday in Lent, this Valentine's Day, God's Spirit gives us the power to embrace what Jesus embraces: a higher purpose, a commitment to something greater than yourself, a life lived with arms wide open in love.