

1 Lent C March 10, 2019
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The Temptation Test
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This past week, when I've asked students and faculty alike how they were doing, the response I usually got was a feeling of relief because they had made it through mid-term exams. That's no surprise because one of the dominating factors of academic institutions like Ohio University is testing. And there so many kinds of tests, each with its own purpose. There are entrance tests people need to take if they want to attend a college or university, and usually a certain score is required, one that is supposed to indicate the person can handle college level work. Once admitted there are quizzes and pop quizzes designed to help students and their professors gage how well they are learning and teaching the material. Mid-terms help professors and students see how well they are learning and applying the subject matter and the final exam is the last chance for students to prove they actually were paying attention and doing their homework all semester.

For those striving to earn masters and doctorate degrees, there are other types of tests, ones like the dissertation defense that can feel more like a trail than an exam, so I've been told. Some types of testing are intended to do more than just test skills and how well someone learns and applies information. Before being admitted to seminary, all potential candidates are required to take a phycological test in addition to an academic test to prove we could handle the stress of seminary living, which can be quite intense. Speaking of intense, if you want to be a member of US Marine Corps, you have to go through something they call the crucible, a two week long intensive test at the end of 11 weeks of boot camp that will test endurance, teamwork, problem solving, and other skills and attitudes that make a person a marine. The point of seminary and boot camp isn't to necessarily learn and apply information. The purpose of those trails is to form someone into something new.

It was this kind of severe trail that consists of different elements intensely interacting with each other in order to create something new that is at the heart of today's Gospel when Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Often, we think of temptation as meaning the inclination to sin, and our imaginations might conjure up images of dark rooms filled with cigarette or cigar smoke swirling ominously around the face of a figure in dark clothes, a dark hat, eyes glinting in the dim light from a little table lamp and grinning a foul way. Or maybe temptation looks less like a 1940's noir movie and more like a noisy casino, strip club, or some other place where people use

each other to get what they want. When we imagine sin, I wonder if we often think of it as an obvious evil, something we definitely know we should not do, but.....the thrill of it, the risk of it, is just too.....tempting....to resist.

But that is not what the temptations the devil brought before Jesus in the wilderness looked like in our Gospel today. These temptations have the feel of testing about them. Only this is no easy mid-term exam, this is more like a crucible intended to show us who Jesus is, and maybe was intended for Jesus to figure out for himself what it means for him to be the Son of God here on earth where there are so many ways we human beings need or want a certain type of savior, and it might be tempting to give us what we think we want.

Jesus entered the wilderness under the lead of the Holy Spirit, so that tells us there is more to this than Jesus wanting some time to himself after his baptism. There is an intense intentionality at work here. The wilderness the author of Luke is referring to here is a desert, a place of very little water and food and very little protection. In our Gospel today you can see Jesus was in the desert for 40 days – that’s Bible language for a long time – and during that long time he ate nothing, which made him famished, that’s a nice word for ravenously hungry. Jesus was more than hungry, he was probably mentally and physically weak from hunger. I do not know if any of you have ever been that hungry, for most of us it is probably pretty hard to imagine, but that hunger seems to have been part of the first test.

Because in that place of exhausted vulnerability the voice of the devil shows up and gives Jesus the bread temptation. Which is not a temptation to do anything evil or bad, is it? Good Lord, Jesus was not just hungry, he was starving. Isn’t feeding the hungry a good thing to do? Isn’t one of the hallmarks of the Kingdom of God that no one go hungry? That all people will eat and have their fill? Isn’t that in the Bible somewhere? And how can Jesus possibly have the strength to do any good at all if he is so weak from hunger? I’m sure we have all heard about the importance of self-care, how when we are in an airplane and those air masks pop out, we are first supposed to secure our own face mask before helping another. The devil hasn’t tempted Jesus to do something that could cause harm. What could be so wrong with turning a stone into bread? Imagine the possibilities. World hunger would not be a problem if Jesus did stuff like that. What good are stones, after all?

That’s the trouble with the devil. The devil doesn’t always offer a situation that is obviously bad. In fact, it can look pretty good at first, even well intentioned. Maybe suggests the dream of God. That’s what makes it so tempting. But God’s dream isn’t just a version of consumerism that makes us comfortable. Because the truth is there is

already enough food on the earth right now for everyone on the planet to eat and have their fill; there is no need to turn stones into bread. The reason why people go hungry isn't because there isn't enough. The reason people go hungry is because too many people believe life is about getting as much bread for yourself as you can and doing whatever it takes to hold onto it. More bread won't save anyone from anything. Jesus didn't come to make more, because even if that is the kind of savior we might want, that is not the kind of savior we need.

If the devil couldn't tempt Jesus with food, then he tempted him with power and wealth and authority by showing him all the kingdoms of the world and offering to give Jesus all of it if Jesus would just worship him. This temptation might sound easier to resist than the one about bread, until we imagine what Jesus could do as king of the world. If Jesus was in charge, then all the stuff he stands for would be the law, right? Things like equality would no longer be something we all have to work for, it would just be the rule of the land. The trouble with this is what the devil was asking of Jesus was to switch his value system and take on the values of the world; to get into politics and become efficient at bureaucracy and all the paperwork that goes with it. To become a cog in the wheel of the status quo, of course a rich and powerful one who would be above the poor instead of beside all people. And the world does not need another savior who would make the system work in his or her favor; Jesus did not come to be that kind of leader.

Nor did Jesus come to show off, to make God some kind of genie in a bottle that pops out whenever Jesus does something silly like jump off the temple just to prove his genie is there whenever he calls. The world does not need another type of entertainer to save us from ourselves, nor does the world need another savior who interprets the Bible by seeing what he or she wants instead of being open to how the Holy Spirit is speaking through the scriptures in different times and circumstances.

The results of the crucible the devil put Jesus through, and the Holy Spirit led Jesus into seems to have resulted in some pretty powerful formation for Jesus, helping Jesus understand what it means for him to be the messiah, the Son of God. He didn't come to magically fix the problems we created or rule over us in a way we are used to, or even to entertain us with a god who will show up and do what we want or justify our personal prejudices. Jesus said no to all that. Instead, Jesus showed the devil and showed himself and us who he is: God's Son who is willing to live with us in the midst of what we have made out of the gifts we have been given, and to do so as God wants him to live, even when that means saying no to things we might want, because they aren't what God is about.

It's interesting that our Gospel today is about Jesus being tempted or tested in the wilderness because today is the first Sunday in the Season of Lent. A time when we are often mindful of our sins and recognize our need to change from being focused less on what we want and change to being focused more on our relationship with God. Often I've interpreted hearing about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness as a sort of biblical form of encouragement for those of us who choose a Lenten discipline whether its fasting from something or taking on things like more time for prayer or reflection, that when we get tempted to quit or skip our Lenten discipline even for just one day, we have Jesus' example in the wilderness to shore up our weak souls and stay strong and true to what we said we would do. But sometimes I wonder if one of the reasons we have Jesus' temptation in the wilderness reading on this day isn't just to have his example to admire. Perhaps it is to wonder how to discern the difference between God's will and our own? After all, there are many devils out there that can be pretty convincing about what we should do with our lives, who or what we should give our lives or our money or our time or our hearts to; and discerning the best way to follow Jesus through those temptations can be really hard and sometimes we can fall into temptation. In preparing for this sermon, I read one person's reflection where he said there have been times when he has been the voice of temptation, usually unintentionally and that was a painful but helpful revelation to him, and his personal journey this Lent is repentance from being the tempter he never aspired to be. I read several other reflections by people that revealed they are worn out from the temptation to be someone's savior, always having the right answer or providing the perfect life for another. Such revelations aren't intended to make us feel shame. That is not the point. Because by confessing, receiving and giving forgiveness the purpose of Lent is intended to create something new, it is intended to revive the spirit that gets distracted or worn out, and our self-prescribed Lenten disciplines aren't meant to be challenges to check off daily as much as they are intended to be the way of opening space for that new spirit within us, and to recognize any temptation as a opportunity to grow closer to our savior who has said no to so much in order to be closer to us. It's a different kind of test, one that doesn't have a final score but does show us and draws us to the savior we need.