

"The Tempter's Snare"

Genesis 3:1-7; Mathew 4:1-11

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 5, 2017 – 1st Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

Our text from Matthew today says that Jesus is led by the Spirit to a place of both desolation and isolation. His first act of dedication in that wilderness is to begin a fast. Clearly Jesus is preparing himself for whatever is to come. He knows that this will be his first real time of testing and that he needs to be strong and ready. His defenses must be high. But it's hard.

Soon the tempter comes to him, almost on cue. There is no surprise when the situation unfolds quickly and the time of trial begins. "If you are the Son of God..." Is the wording here intentional? This then is the first line of attack: an appeal to vanity. "If you are really the Son of God, if you are really God's Beloved, if you are really the One Waited For, then...."

Ah, yes, of course, here comes the inevitable "then!" And everything turns on that word. All the superlatives that come before it fall into line from that point on. "If you are the Son of God ... then turn these stones into bread! Why, you're famished! You don't have to endure it. You're above all this. Rocks into bread, why that's nothing at all for one who has the power you have. Besides, who's going to know it? Come on, enjoy yourself and no one will be the wiser. Wouldn't that be something you would like?"

Of course Jesus is hungry. His stomach growls and twists inside of him. Just a little bit of food and he will feel so much better. Sooner or later this fast must end anyway, so why not now? It's so easy to say "yes." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

The tempter is not deterred, though, but has just begun.

All of a sudden Jesus is transported to the holy city of Jerusalem and to the highest elevation of the temple. From there he sees the countryside spreading out before him and the teeming metropolis beneath his feet. He is not in the holy of holies, but above it. No king, no high priest, no matter how great has ever had such an exalted perch. It is his alone to claim.

He rises on the back of Moses and Elijah, of Saul and David, of all the priests and prophets before him. Great as they were, they have merely paved the way for him and this day. Emperors and their legions are merely minor characters on the world scene. Midas and all his wealth is like a pauper with a few coins. No one commands creation like he does now. He can do anything.

The Tempter addresses him: "If you are the Son of God, then fly, soar, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. There is nothing that can hurt you if you invoke your power! You can do anything you like, And why? Because you can, that's why!'"

How flattering that is to hear, but he replies firmly, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Ah, but the Tempter has not given up yet. There is more to work to do and even greater possibilities to be considered.

Now Jesus was elevated to the highest mountain on earth and shown the kingdoms of the world in all their splendor. He was given a panorama of the world and all its inhabitants as no individual had even been presented before. Ultimate power was spread out before him, then offered to him, with only one stipulation by the Tempter.

Such a simple request it is, and so reasonable as well. "All these I will give you, and even more, if you will fall down and worship me. If you are really the Son of God, then stop being the Son of God and be my son! And I will give you the world! You will have domination over everything and everyone. No one has ever had this possibility before and nobody will have it again. It is yours, and yours alone, and requires just one brief word, "yes."

Jesus stared out as the whole earth lay before him. The vastness of time and space were never more apparent to him, the promise of gain never stronger. After a prolonged silence during which this supreme offer was considered, Jesus spoke clearly and forcefully, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

And as quickly as the tempter appeared, the Evil One suddenly disappeared, because on that day the power of destruction was no match for the power of good. And Good, in the person of Christ, went forward to fulfill the plan and intention of the Lord God. And there was no turning back.

Now the scripture for today is complete, but the story isn't; for the Tempter is still around and unrelenting. Evil wins its victories still, not over Christ—for that was decided long ago—but with ordinary people in every age even to this very moment. The effort is so hidden and subtle, though, that we hardly realize it is happening. Evil still attempts to pry us away from good through some of the very same tactics that were employed in the wilderness.

The Tempter appeals to our vanity and compliments charm our ego. They make us seem more important in the greater scheme of things than we really are. For it's true, we want to feel significant in life. We want to be somebody. The Evil One knows the easiest route to this end is not by elevating ourselves through love and sacrifice, but by casting others aside through judgment and indifference. It convinces us to look at ourselves in relation to others, and then come to the conclusion "I'm OK; you're not OK. I'm right; you're wrong. I'm good; you're not. I'm privileged; you aren't. I deserve the best; you don't."

Temptation bribes us with wealth and power, giving us advantage over others in the temporal affairs of life. It whispers to us that our "success" is evidence of our superiority. It argues that we should enjoy the spoils because we are the more deserving of gain. It causes us to turn a blind eye to how we have gotten to where we are and allows us to downplay what should be rightful compassion and concern for others.

Temptation comes to us looking so innocent, that we may totally miss what has begun to influence our lives. Once it's done it's work in us, we are often adamant not to have it undone.

It's hard to take what time has built up in us and begin to question its legitimacy. We don't like to admit that we've been taken in... and, at least to some extent, that all of us have been tainted.

The sermon today is not really a condemnation, don't take it for that; but a plea for consideration. This is an opportunity put before us. This is a call to consider who we are, what we believe, what we stand for, and how we live.

That kind of introspection is what the season of Lent is really all about. That's why people generally don't like Lent so much. It doesn't have the joy of Eastertide or the anticipation of Christmas, or the enthusiasm of Pentecost. Lent pushes its way into our space despite our resistance. It encourages us to look honestly at ourselves so that we might determine upon what base we build our lives. Then it encourages us to make an effort to readjust our foundation always a possibility if it is found lacking.

What is the return on making such an effort? The reward comes in building our life on Christ's way and that is ultimately the path of inner peace and satisfaction. It is walking with Jesus instead of deviating from his path. It is discovering God's way and then knowing that the direction we're headed will bring us to the destination we long for.

When we turn away from the Tempter's snare, we have the assurance that we are not alone in the living of our lives. Jesus pledges to come with us on our journeys and be there to help us when we need his strength and clarity