

Lent I (RCL/C): "Lead Us Not Into Temptation"

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16, Luke 4:1-13

March 5-6, 2022

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Just putting it out there: "The devil made me do it!" doesn't really fly. We believe in the **existence** of the devil, all right. But we also believe in **free will**, our ability to choose between what God **commands** us to do and what the devil **tempts** us to do. Not that it's **always** clear in **every** situation. But sometimes it **is** clear what is selfish and what is selfless, what is holy and what is hellish. As baptized children of God we have the Holy Spirit strengthening us to do the next right thing.

Luther was critical of those who imagined Satan hiding behind every bush. But we Christians **do** believe in the reality of evil, maybe not personified as a visible devil with horns and a pitchfork – but a very **real** entity at deadly cross-purposes with God, endlessly working to destroy what God has created – including us – maneuvering to rob us of life and love, health and holiness – laboring to leach the joy out of the everlasting life that began for us in Holy Baptism and continues beyond this earthly life. Satan's agenda? Replace hope with despair, swap out faith with distrust in God's mercy, sow seeds of doubt about forgiveness, counter the very existence of God or at least lobby against the existence of a **loving** God, make God irrelevant and love of neighbor laughable, convince us that we are striking a blow for freedom when we are actually acting selfishly.

In today's Gospel Jesus is completely isolated in the desert and weak from 40 days of fasting. Yet when confronted with profound temptations He chooses the hard way of holiness rather than the easy course of caving in: buckling to the creature comfort of bread, to the Siren call of political power, to the allure of proving He's special by demanding divine protection. Jesus is tempted, and Jesus overcomes temptation. In this early chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, the Lord is setting the stage for His whole public ministry. Before hitting the road He is making it clear Who He is, Whose He is, and Whom He will serve. He is our role model.

“Now, wait a minute,” you might say. “Of course Jesus didn’t fall to temptation; Jesus is God.” True, Jesus is fully divine, but our faith also teaches us that Jesus was fully human. Jesus’ hunger after not eating for a long time was every bit as intense as **our** hunger would be. But He chose not to turn hard stones into nice little loaves of warm bread. Jesus was aware that wielding political power would increase His stock with the Jewish people who fully expected the Messiah to be a military leader, even a king. But He didn’t opt for that shortcut to acceptance because it would have been a wrench in the works of His true Messiahship. Jesus had heard His Father’s voice during His baptism: “This is my Son, my Chosen....” But He chose not to step off the dizzying height of the Temple pinnacle to force the Father to prove it! **Jesus did not equate physical protection from harm with proof of His Father’s love.** He overcame that temptation again in the Garden of Gethsemane: *“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not My will but yours be done.”* (Luke 22:42)

‘Could be that one of our greatest temptations is to forget that we are held to a higher standard of behavior as baptized children of God. The excuse “Everybody does it” holds no water as an excuse to lie or steal, whether it’s kids lying to parents or cheating on a test, or adults cheating on their taxes or on their spouse.

“He deserved it!” is no excuse for punching someone on the playground or playing field or dishonestly undercutting someone in business.

“But it’s true, she **did** do it!” or “It’s common knowledge!” is no excuse for sharing the unflattering truth about somebody else’s life, a story that is **not** ours to share and that embarrasses and hurts the person and the reputation of the one in question.

Human sexuality is a beautiful gift of God and the human body is a divine work of art. But pornography reduces human beings to things to be used and abused to satisfy personal, selfish cravings. It is evil.

Pain relievers and alcohol, in and of themselves, are not bad. Pain relief is an answer to prayer and Jesus turned water into wine in Cana of Galilee. But the Evil One uses **addiction** to these substances to destroy relationships, families, bodies, lives. In St. Mark's Gospel Satan is referred to as "the Adversary." Addiction makes the Adversary glad. Recovery makes God glad, and it is God's grace that makes recovery possible.

In explaining the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment, "Honor your mother and your father," Luther says:

"We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, love and respect them."

Luther believed that God uses civil authorities to bless the people with an orderly and just society, to live their lives in peace. But he was not blind to the reality of political corruption and the temptation to **abuse** power. The abuse of power for personal gain is a betrayal of the people God loves and a sin against God as well as neighbor. It is evil. When civilians are killed, and unprovoked war is waged, as in Ukraine, when a million people have to flee their homes to fly from a war fueled by desire to dominate and further to enrich oligarchs, it is evil.

Satan's perversion of the Lord's Prayer is, "**My** dark kingdom come, **my** unholy will be done."

God's Kingdom is the time and place where love rules and blessings are shared and brokenness is healed and Jesus is Lord. Satan's kingdom is the time and place where mistrust and hatred rule, where everyone looks out for #1, where what is whole is shattered, when self is elevated and God is mocked and Jesus is irrelevant.

What did we hear a couple weeks ago in the Gospel? "*Your Father in Heaven is kind. You be kind*" (Luke 6: 36). Last week we were reminded of our baptismal marching orders: "*Let your light so shine before others they see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven*" (Matthew 5:16). Any inclination to be less than kind, to suck the light out of a room instead of shining brightly with the light of Christ, is a temptation from the Evil One to act like something other than a baptized child of God.

By praying often, spending time with the written Word of God often, receiving the Holy Supper often, participating in the community of faith often, we are receiving grace to withstand temptation and we're protected by a guard rail of grace. This includes input from those who know and love us, who either say, "Way to go!" or "Wait, what were you thinking?" There's holy accountability in community; the faith family is a powerful channel for the Holy Spirit to communicate with us. It's a safe place where, by God's grace, we are affirmed, challenged, loved, forgiven, fed, and sent forth in joy and gratitude, not serving our own interests but those of God and God's children. As one of the pavers in our Memorial Garden walkway says, Holy Trinity and every faith community is meant to be a "grace place."

Dear Holy Spirit, when we're kidding ourselves, expose the disconnect between what we profess in worship and how we live our weekday lives. Grant that we declare ourselves as Yours at the beginning of each day, call upon Your power to do the next right thing, and act accordingly. Give us grace to **choose** to obey Your commands rather than satisfying creature comforts, when there is a choice between the two. Send Your Holy Spirit to help us do what is right rather than what is expedient, to value our souls over our bodies, to refuse to equate Your love with bodily protection and the absence of suffering. May we chart our life course by devotion to You and obedience to Your commandments above all else.

And when we fall short, remind us of the wisdom we find in the Letter to the Hebrews (ch. 4):

*<sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

For Jesus' sake. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham