

LET'S MAKE A DEAL
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Luck 4: 1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’”

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.”

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered, “It says, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

I suppose that all of us at one time or another has played “Let’s Make a Deal” with God. Perhaps someone that we loved was in crises with a potentially fatal disease. We promised God all kinds of worthy behaviors if that person could be healed. Who has not prayed for divine intervention facing a final exam in calculus or chemistry with

commitments offered for church attendance or a higher pledge to the budget?

I am reminded of the story of the little boy who wanted a new bicycle for Christmas. He had longed for it the past two Christmas seasons with no results. He first thought he should write to Santa Claus with the most heartfelt plea. “No,” he decided, “I should write someone a little higher up. I should write to Jesus.”

With a fresh piece of paper he began his letter, “Dear Jesus. This is Billy. If you were to get me a bicycle for Christmas I promise I will be a good boy and stop hitting my sister.”

He wadded the letter up and threw it in the trashcan. With a fresh piece of paper he wrote, “Dear Jesus. This is Billy. If you were to get me a bicycle for Christmas I promise to do all of my homework and stop stealing apples from Mrs. Wilson’s tree.”

Billy wadded up that letter and sat for a long time thinking. Then he remembered the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary that stood on the hearth. He ran down stairs and grabbed the statue. With a bath towel he wrapped the Blessed Virgin up and stuffed her into the bottom drawer of his wardrobe.

Sitting down at his desk, Billy began a new letter. “Dear Jesus. This is Billy. If you ever want to see your mother again...”

There are actually many stories in the Bible of people bargaining with God. Abraham bartered the life of Lot and his family when God was considering the entire annihilation of the city of Sodom. When Moses came off of Mt. Sinai it was discovered that the people had worshipped the golden calf. God declared to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” Moses was able to talk God down. Even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane asks of God, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.”

In the reading of Luke’s gospel this morning God is not one of the dealers. The bargaining is between the devil and Jesus. And from the very beginning we must understand that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into this confrontation. The power of goodness often leads us into difficult moral choices. The source of life compels us to determine some course of action that will hopefully make life more abundant for others. Think of the doctor who has trained for many years to save lives. That doctor happens upon a terrible accident. There are men, women, and children with

varying degrees of injury. Some will die. That doctor must determine which patient to let go of, which patients to postpone treatment for, and which patients to attend to immediately. We all know this as triage. The doctor is compelled by the goodness of his or her heart and by disciplined training to make such choices. And while this scenario is not about good and evil, it is a moral scenario where good choices leave some to die.

The story of the temptation of Jesus is positioned at the beginning of his ministry. The question for him is what is the nature and shape of his ministry. Whom will he serve and how will he serve them? Like the doctor in the triage setting, Jesus must make ethical decisions. He must struggle with the powers that life has given him and determine their placement, their uses, and their hoped-for meanings.

Now let's back up a second. Gary, are you saying that Jesus was brought by the power of God into a moral contest? Yes, nobody, even Jesus, is exempt from the challenge. Are you saying that even those who are faithful or spiritual must engage the conflict of moral agency? Yes, especially those who claim to follow the Way of Jesus. I would even go so far as to say that the question of the church's ministry and the uses of its power and resources is up for grabs every morning.

You see, history, literature, poetry, the arts and sciences prove one thing about human experience. There is within us and among us a strong opposition to love, wholeness, health, goodness, and peace. The movement of evil has many names: racism, xenophobia, greed, fear, anger, pride, and so on. It is in the news and on broadcast television everyday and with continuous live feed. This week Joseph Stack flew his airplane into the IRS building in Austin, TX because he was mad at the federal government. Amy Bishop murdered three colleagues at the University of Alabama in Huntsville because she did not get tenure. Despite billion dollar profits health insurance companies are raising premiums from 15 to 40% while the United States Congress wallows in the cesspool of political partisanship. Toyota drags its feet on corporate responsibility for faulty automobiles. The Pope does not have the decency to get on his knees and beg the forgiveness of the people of Ireland for decades of child sexual, mental, and physical abuse.

There is some evil that works against the well being of people. It degrades them, oppresses them, and exploits them. Evil is sometimes personal, political, or social. Individuals, communities, and the whole human race at various times commit evil. It is palpable and often seems to assume its own persona. Whatever its expression or means, evil stands

over and against humanity and the will of God that every human have an abundant life.

Whether out of human decency or faith commitment every one of us makes choices about our relationship with evil. Will we defend others against it? How will we use our powers to combat it? Or do we compromise with evil and just “try to get along?”

The problem of temptation is more complex than Luke’s story suggests. The Holy Spirit led Jesus to a moral contest. But prior to that contest the world is beset with evil. We would not need, hope for, work for, or pray for the Kingdom of God if everything and everybody were in good relationships with one another. The contest would not be necessary if wholeness abounded. Now we are suggesting that how we respond to the problem of evil in our world is yet again another kind of contest. In other words, our best intentions and our best efforts to put forth the Kingdom of God are morally challenged. We have not opened the first soup kitchen, hospital, or school for the betterment of humankind when motives and responses are called into question.

You know, this stuff can make you dizzy sometimes!

How to respond to a broken world is a significant challenge. In Luke’s story the devil suggests to Jesus a social response, a political

option, and the choice of supernatural religion.¹ Briefly, the devil proposes a social possibility. Turn bread into stone. Well, if you are a hungry person that sounds like a real good choice. Turn vacant buildings into housing for the homeless. Guarantee social security. Surely the Kingdom of God would look something like that.

Consider the political option. Imagine Jesus as the king of the world. All other powers have pledged their fealty to him. That might sound good the oppressed people of the world. Surely Jesus would be a better ruler than most of the potentates and politicians on the face of the planet.

Or, give us a Savior who will perform all kinds of magic like jumping off of high buildings and not getting killed. Isn't that the kind of Christ the world needs? Well, that might satisfy people for a brief time, at least until something better comes along like extreme snow boarding! Of course, Jesus would have to show us something more than Shawn White's "Double McTwist 1260" on the super halfpipe at the Olympics.

Jesus rejects all of these options. He declines the offer to be a social worker, politician, or religious celebrity. The story does not tell us what Jesus' plan for ministry will be. But the Kingdom of God will

¹ See Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, from the Interpretation Bible Commentary (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 54-57.

apparently not be about social policy, the manipulation of governmental power, or supernatural high jinks. What Jesus understands the Kingdom of God to be about is found in his teachings, stories and parables.

I think the importance of this story is the teaching about temptation. You see, temptation is not about weakness. Temptation is about strength and power. Luke suggests that Jesus is not tempted with something that is beyond his power. After all, if, as the devil suggests, Jesus really is the Son of God he would be the Super Social Worker, the Potent Politician, and the Grand Wizard of Religiosity. But Jesus does not wish to be Gandalf the White or Superman.

The other thing about temptation is that real temptation is not about failure or embarrassing disgraces. Sex or alcohol or trinkets do not tempt Jesus. That is just kid's stuff that makes for daytime television. We too readily identify temptation with personal peccadilloes or tawdry habits.

C.S. Lewis put it this way:

“According to Christian teaching, the essential vice, the utmost evil is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.”²

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 69.

The real temptation for Jesus is the rise of pride, the pride of power. The real temptation for Jesus and for us is the abuse of power. The pride of power devastates human beings.

The story is told of the Medieval Pope who was down in the treasury vaults of the Vatican. He surveyed all of the valuable works of art. He took note of the jewels and gems. He counted chests full of gold and silver. Turning to his companion, said in some versions to be the Dominican friar Albertus Magnus, the Pope said, “No longer will the church have to say, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’”

“Yes,” replied the Bishop, “and no longer can the church say, ‘Rise, take up your pallet and walk.’”

We are inevitably confronted with the reality of evil. That is a moral challenge. How we will confront evil is also a moral challenge. On January 30, 1923 Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli of Germany signed a concordat with German diplomat Franz Van Papen. The agreement allowed the Roman Catholic Church to worship freely. The Church agreed that it would not engage its religion with Hitler’s politics.

Pacelli was elected Pope in 1939, and took the name Pius XII. Throughout the next six years he essentially honored the pact that he had made with the Third Reich. He issued no statement of condemnation of

Kristallnacht (the night of broken glass). On that night 97 Jews were murdered by the SS, the Gestapo, and the Hitler youth. Between 25,000 and 30,000 Jews were sent to concentration camps. Jewish businesses and home were destroyed and 267 synagogues were wrecked. Though he had been informed by Berlin's papal nuncio, Pius XII said nothing.

In 1940, the Chief Rabbi of Palestine begged to Pope to intercede on behalf of Spanish Jews who were to be deported to Germany. In October of 1941, the Assistant Chief of the U.S. delegation to the Vatican, Harold Tittman, asked the pope to condemn the atrocities against the Jews. The pope declared that the Holy See would remain "neutral." Cardinal Theodor Innitzer informed Pius XII in 1942 that Slavakian Jews were being deported to Germany and exterminated. Pius XII did nothing. Later that same year Ukrainian Metropolitan Andrej Septyckyj wrote a long letter to the pope detailing the deaths of 200,000 Ukrainian Jews. The pope replied with a quotation from the psalms stating that Septyckyj would need to "bear adversity with serene patience."³

³ Shira Schoenberg, "Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust;" *Jewish Virtual Library*, copyright 2010, The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise.
<http://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourse/anti-semitism/pius.html>

Some have argued that the pope was afraid of German reprisals. Others suggest that if he criticized the Reich it would split the German Catholic Church.

I do not think that the pope was blind to the evil of fascism in Hitler's movement. Indeed, in a speech in 1935 he stated that the National Socialist movement was "profoundly anti-Christian and a danger to Catholicism."⁴ I have already suggested the written documentation that informed him of the holocaust.

The temptation that he confronted is the question of how he would meet this face of evil. How would he bring the gospel of Jesus Christ, as represented in the Roman Catholic Church, to front Hitler's genocide? The Roman Catholic Church then and now is a very powerful institution. How does any Pope wield his power in the conflict with evil? One could argue that Pius XII chose the path of political compromise by agreeing to be silent. He made a deal with the devil and tried to baptize his ethical compromise with words like "neutrality" and "serene patience."

Now lest you think I am being unfair to the Roman Catholic Church this morning, let us be reminded that the protestant church in Hitler's Germany was called the Reich Kirk. The Reich Kirk was not

⁴ Ibid.

only silent about the slaughter of the Jews, it cloaked the Third Reich with theological legitimacy.⁵

Some say that the world made the same compromise in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, when the Tutsis and Hutu tribes sought to annihilate one another.

None of us have much difficulty understanding the injustices, tyranny, and poverty that ravage so many people in the world. It is much more difficult for us to discern the moral path that will bring our resources, strengths, and power to subdue them. How will we restore people to the wholeness of life? How will we reconcile those who have been oppressed? How will we initiate sustainable economies around the world or achieve some semblance of distributive justice.

Those are hard moral questions. That's the stuff of real temptation. Progressive Christians might decide to dismiss the ethic problem by dismissing the story altogether. After all, would it not be tempting to spend our time arguing about whether or not we believe in the devil in the first place?

Finis
