

WPC  
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Facing Up to Temptation  
Psalm 91; Luke 4:1-13

The long version of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness only appears in two of the four gospels: Matthew and Luke. John leaves it out altogether and Mark covers the whole incident in two sentences: "the Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." (Mark 1:12-13) That's it; that's all Mark tells us.

Anyone who remembers more than that is remembering the story as told by Matthew or Luke, because those are the only two who go into any detail about what the devil said and what Jesus said back. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "What this dialog proves among other things is that the devil is biblically literate. He knows exactly where to find the Bible verses he needs to put Jesus to the test, but Jesus knows more than what the Bible says. Jesus knows how to do what the Bible says, which is how he passes his wilderness exam." (BBT, Day 1, 2/21/10)

In the wilderness Jesus is tempted to be someone other than who he was meant to be. In rejecting the devil's temptations, Jesus reveals to the

world who he really is: the Savior, the Messiah, the Son of God. He is defined by what he rejects, for the devil's temptations are for Jesus to deny his true identity.

In the book The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis, an elderly devil, Screwtape, writes a series of letters giving advice on how to win humans away from God to another devil, his young nephew Wormwood. Here's what Screwtape has to say about the art of temptation:

"You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy [God]. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." (Screwtape Letters, p. 56)

The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness by the devil is a familiar story to those of us who have grown up in the church. The book of Hebrews makes it clear that resisting these temptations was not easy for Jesus (4:14 says "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/tempted as we are, yet without sin.")

According to Fred Craddock, "it is important to keep in mind that a real temptation beckons us to do that about which much good can be said. Stones to bread - the hungry hope so; take political control - the oppressed hope so; leap from the temple - those longing for proof of God's power hope so. All this is to say that a real temptation is an offer not to fall but to rise. The tempter in Eden did not ask, 'Do you wish to be as the devil?' but 'Do you wish to be as God?' If anyone is having trouble believing that Jesus was really tempted, then he or she needs to keep in mind that temptation is an indication of strength, not of weakness. We are not tempted to do what we cannot do but what is within our power. The greater the strength, the greater the temptation." (Craddock, Interpretation Commentary, p. 56)

I find it comforting that Jesus struggled with temptation, just as I do today. I have a harder time identifying personally with Jesus when he walks on the water or raises someone from the dead, but Jesus being tempted? That I can identify with; that's something concrete we have in common. We face temptation all the time. We're tempted to cheat on our taxes, gossip about a friend, lie our way out of trouble...you name it. We're always being

tempted to do what we know we shouldn't do. We don't need any instruction about temptation. Temptation we know.

...Or do we?

A Sunday School teacher once told her class, "The best measure of a person is what you would do if you knew no one would ever find out." In other words, when you take away your desire for a reward and your fear of punishment because no one will ever find out, what you do in life grows out of your identity, of who you understand yourself to be.

In that light, our view of temptation may be far too shallow. Ordinarily, we think of temptation as the urge to do something we really would like to do but know we shouldn't do - one more smoke, one more throw of the dice, one more juicy rumor. But, as Tom Long says, "the deepest temptation is not the urge to misbehave, to do what we know we shouldn't do, but rather the enticement to compromise our baptismal identity, to be who we are not called to be." (Long, 20)

That's the message in this story of Jesus' temptation. The devil is not tempting Jesus to misbehave. The devil is tempting Jesus to ignore his baptism, to deny who he is, to forget that he is the child of his Father in heaven.

It's significant that Jesus comes to the temptation immediately from his baptism, when the skies opened and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." That's who he is. "You are my Beloved Son. You are my anointed one, my suffering servant. You are the one I am sending down the long and painful road to Jerusalem. You are the one I am calling to drink the bitter cup of sacrifice. You are the one I am delivering into the hands of those who will kill you. You are the one I am sending to bear the cross of salvation of all people. You are the one. You are my beloved Son, and I am well-pleased with you." (Tom Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, p. 20)

It is, then, when Jesus' vocation and identity are most clear, that he comes to the wilderness where he is tempted. It's temptation to identity theft, though it doesn't involve any credit cards or Social Security numbers. It's precisely Jesus' identity that the devil seeks to destroy. Notice how the tempter begins, "*If* you are the Son of God..." He could have attacked directly: "You are not the Son of God," but he was too crafty for that. Much better to generate self-doubt -- "*If* you are the Son of God..."

The devil picks away, then, at Jesus' identity as God's Son, at his baptismal identity. The three temptations - to turn stones into bread, to throw himself down from the top of the temple and to worship the tempter -

are not enticements to *do* bad things; they are, at root, invitations to be somebody else, to lay aside his dangerous mission and be someone other than the Savior we need.

Everything about the early chapters of Luke - from the birth narratives to the account of Jesus' baptism - makes it plain that Jesus' identity was closely tied into the narrative of God's salvation. The devil wants him to change the script, to forget who he is and to trade God's story for some other story. Notice that Jesus combats the devil's attack not with clever and skillful counter-arguments but by citing the scriptures that he was taught as a child. In other words, Jesus resists the devil by quoting the Holy Scriptures he had memorized and knowing what they meant. That's the importance of Bible study – anyone, even the devil, can easily quote from the Scriptures. The trick is knowing what the text really means. Jesus refuses to change the script; he will not live a narrative other than the one he has been given; he remembers his baptism, and he knows who he is.

Because we belong to Jesus Christ, we, too, have been given a part in God's story of redemption. We have been called in our baptism to be God's beloved children. Long says, "Because we are called, we are also tempted, tempted to change the script, tempted to live out another story, tempted to be someone other than who we are called to be. To yield to temptation is far

more serious than to commit some transgression; to yield to temptation is to say, 'I am not a child of God, and I will not take my part in God's drama of redemption.'" (Long, p. 21)

I love a story that Tom Long tells about his senior year in high school when he worked off-stage for the school play. The director was a young woman who taught English at the school, a new addition to the faculty, and she poured herself into her students and into the play.

Night after night they rehearsed, and on opening night, they were ready; they had the play down perfectly. The curtains opened; the house was packed with families and friends; electricity was in the air.

The first act was a dream. The play was a comedy, and every funny line evoked rich laughter from the audience. They were really enjoying themselves. But in the second act, an actor forgot his lines. You could see on his face that he knew it was his turn to speak, but he could not find the words. The audience did not sense it yet, but the other actors and the workers off-stage did.

What to do? Everybody was paralyzed as this unfortunate classmate squirmed and tried to remember what he was supposed to say. The young teacher, script in her hand, was just about to whisper his line out to him,

when suddenly he spoke. It was not the line in the script – in his anxiety, he just made something up – but he spoke. Not only that, what he said happened to be funny, and the audience roared with laughter.

Everybody on stage relaxed; they had gotten past a bad spot and could now work past it. Unfortunately, thought, the forgetful actor heard the laughter of the audience and liked it, so he made up another line. This, too, was funny...not as funny as the first line, but the audience chuckled. So, the actor made up another line, and another, and still another.

The other actors were trying to respond to him, but they couldn't. He was out of control now, spinning off whatever came into his head. The play was disintegrating, lost. The audience had now figured it out, and what little laughter was left was nervous and mocking.

Long doesn't remember how they got out of it, how they finished the play, or even if they did. The memory that sticks in his mind is looking up to see the director, the young woman who had given night after night of her time to work with them and make them ready, this woman who had poured herself into this play for their benefit, standing in the wings, watching and crying. (Tom Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, p. 22-23).

In God's drama of redemption, Jesus has the lead role. The devil tempted him to improvise, to change the script, to deny his identity. But Jesus remembered who he was and refused to change the script.

Like Jesus, we too have been given roles in God's story. Through baptism, we know our identities: You are a Son of God...you are a daughter of God. We know our parts: love the Lord God with all of our hearts, minds, soul, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. And like Jesus, we will be tempted. "Even now the tempter whispers in our ears, change the script, make up your own lines. Everything is at stake, and the one who has poured his life into preparing us is watching." (Long, p. 24) May God continue to help us along the way. Amen.