

TEMPTING WINDFALL

Did you read in the paper this week about the man who was supposed to receive about \$35,000 from his title company? Somehow a mistake was made, and the title company ended up transferring \$350,000 to the man's bank account instead.

According to the paper, the man said that he first went to his pastor about the matter, and the pastor said that the money might be a blessing from God that he could use to do good works. God does work in some mysterious ways. But, the man felt like he needed some legal as well as some theological help to pull this little miracle off so he went to a lawyer for advice.

Now, apparently the lawyer felt like that old children's phrase "finders keepers, losers weepers" was somewhere in the Florida statutes. But, just to be safe she felt like this man needed to transfer all that found money, along with \$14,000 of his own cash into a bank account of their choosing for safekeeping!

I know all this is hard to believe, but it's in the Orlando Sentinel so it has to be true, right? Anyway, you can guess what happened. After a month, the title company finally figured out where their money had gone and wanted it back. Unfortunately, the lawyer and her henchman had already dipped into the money to the tune of \$40,000, something about a loan at one percent interest. The folks in law enforcement were not amused, and the end of this little story is yet to be written.

But, you have to wonder, how can something like this happen? Surely these people knew that the money didn't just float down from the sky and into this man's bank account?

Of course they knew. But, this mistake provided the opportunity for weak people to be tested. And they failed the test.

THE OPPORTUNE TIME

The last verse of our Scripture lesson for today tells us that after Jesus resisted the three temptations of the devil in the wilderness, the devil left Jesus. But, the devil didn't leave Jesus forever. The Scripture tells us that the devil departed from him until a more "opportune time."

There is an "opportune time" in everyone's life when temptation comes. Perhaps, there is an opportunity to make some money in a questionable deal at the expense of a trusted client. Perhaps there is an opportunity for a man to sow some wild oats while he is out of town on a business trip. Perhaps just one little lie would make things easier for a student to make a good grade at school.

The opportune time for temptation comes to us all. When it comes, it won't seem like all that big a deal. Indeed, that's what makes it an "opportune time" for temptation. The smaller and more inconsequential a temptation seems, the more likely we are to succumb.

But, often succumbing to temptation at the wrong time can destroy many lives forever.

We have seen recently that no one is immune to the danger. A local sheriff is arrested for improperly using his office to line his pockets with cash. Ministers are driven from their posts because of sexual misconduct. If you believe that you cannot be tempted, look out! The opportune time for temptation is bound to be right around the corner.

THE WILDERNESS

The temptation of Jesus provides us with a good example of how temptation occurs and how temptation can be defeated. According to the Scripture Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert (or wilderness). And it was in this place, the wilderness, that He was tempted.

Now, what's the significance of the wilderness? I have couple of suggestions why the wilderness is the ideal setting for temptation to occur.

First, the wilderness is an isolated place. No one knows what you're doing in the wilderness. If you want to know what a person is really like, ask what they do when they think no one else is watching.

And second, the wilderness is a place of depravation. The resources that we normally take for granted are not available in the wilderness. If we are in the wilderness, there will come a time when our supplies run out, and our hunger beckons us to do something about it.

This is where we find Jesus today, in the wilderness. There's no one around, and he's famished.

A hungry person is a person who is ripe for temptation. When we are hungry in some way, when we don't have enough resources to do what needs to be done, we naturally begin to doubt ourselves. And, more than that, we can also be tempted to doubt God's goodness.

The immediate context for today's lesson is the baptism of Jesus. Do you remember what the voice from heaven told Jesus after he was baptized? "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." But, what did that mean exactly? How should Jesus take this proclamation from heaven that he was the Son of God? Did it mean that Jesus would not be subject to the struggles of life, that he would not suffer hunger?

STONES INTO BREAD

That's how the devil interpreted it for Jesus. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." The essence of temptation is found not in the thing to be done, but in the motive for doing it. In this case, the devil was tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread as a way of proving to himself that he was indeed the Son of God.

Tom Long, professor of preaching at Emory University, suggests that we should not view these temptations as bad deeds that the devil provokes Jesus to commit. Instead, we should see these temptations as alternative stories that Jesus is invited to adopt as his life story. For example, Jesus would later tell his disciples that his life was to be one of service for others. He said, "I am among you as one who serves." (Luke 22:17)

But, in the desert, the devil proposes a different story, the story of a self-centered life. He said, "Command this stone to become bread. Live out a life in which you spend your energies and gifts serving yourself."

Keeping our minds focused on the hunt for daily bread is one sure way to keep our minds off of any notion that God has a greater plan for our lives. Just keep your nose to the grindstone as you worry about fulfilling the next need in your life, and you can live a whole life that is totally devoid of meaning.

Why are so many of us caught up in this temptation? Because we believe in the “if” of the devil’s temptation more than the promise of God’s daily provision. Our lives are filled with constant worry.

“What if what I have is not enough? Who will take care of me? Who will provide for my needs? Am I really a child of God? Maybe I need to prove my worth in some way. Maybe I need to make something happen.”

It’s this terrible uncertainty about the future that causes people to trust in money or power instead of in God alone.

But, Jesus in his rejection of this temptation teaches us that the proof of success is not found in the ability to turn stones into bread or in the ability to turn labor into paychecks. Bread is necessary. But, we cannot let the pursuit of bread become a “god.” If we do that, if we fall for this temptation, we miss out on the one thing that we really cannot do without each and every day, and that is the presence of God himself.

NOT BY BREAD ALONE

Jesus answered this temptation, as he does with all three temptations, with a quote from Scripture. He said, “It is written. One does not live by bread alone.” (Deuteronomy 8:3)

That Scripture from Deuteronomy that Jesus partially quotes also tells us that God humbled his people in the desert by making them hungry and then providing them with the heavenly bread, manna. It was through their struggle and hunger in the wilderness that they learned to trust God’s provision more than their own ability to provide what was needed.

We need to learn the same lesson. I ask you, “What hunger dominates your life? Is it the struggle to make an important decision? Is it the desire for a new job or more money? Is it a desperate wish for healing and health? Is it the desire for a new relationship with someone special?”

Whatever your hunger, you must learn that the solution to your needs cannot become an all-encompassing desire. There must be more to life than bread alone. There must be God and God’s will for your life.

Jesus shows us how to keep hunger from controlling our lives. It is by remembering that the script for our life is not written by the “powers that be” in our world. God writes the script for our life, and God tells us that we are more than just producers of goods and consumers of products. We are his sons and daughters, and we do not live by bread alone.

WORSHIPING THE GOD OF POWER

Having failed with his first temptation, the devil tries another. He shows Jesus “in an instant” the kingdoms of the world and all their glory. The devil tells Jesus that these kingdoms have been given over to him and that he can give them to anyone he pleases. All Jesus has to do is worship Satan.

Now this sounds like an easy temptation to refuse. Surely anyone and especially Jesus would know that only God should be worshipped. But, this temptation is not as easy for Jesus or us to refuse as it first seems.

For example, sometimes in the struggle of nation against nation it does seem like the devil is in charge of things. In the heat of battle it does often seem like we must fight "fire with fire."

If our enemy attacks us, then it's only "right" that we do what is "necessary" to destroy that enemy. Extreme times call for extreme measures.

But, if we adopt our enemy's tactics in the struggle for power, do we not become what we despise? Do we not in essence worship the devil in order to obtain our goal of worldly glory?

One of the most impressive parts of Mel Gibson's new movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, occurs in the opening scene. Jesus is agonizing over the decision to sacrifice himself on the cross for the sake of all humanity. In the movie, the character symbolizing the devil is in the garden tempting Jesus to say "no" to God's will.

The part about the devil being there is not in the gospels, but I think that it is a good dramatic interpretation. This was indeed an opportune time for temptation.

Jesus does not want this way that his Father has chosen for him. He prays over and over again, "Father, if there's any other way, show it to me." But there is no other way. God's will requires that Jesus voluntarily take up the way of the cross.

OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD

Why? Why did Jesus have to die on the cross instead of leading a rebellion?

The answer is in the story of the Passion. Pilate asked Jesus if he were a king. And Jesus told Pilate, "Yes, I am a king. I was born for this. But my kingdom is not of this world."

In other words, Jesus refused to get caught up in the power struggles of Pilate and the Jewish leaders. In doing this, Jesus was once again refusing temptation. Jesus knew that he could not overcome evil with evil. As he told Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, "He who lives by the sword dies by the sword."

But, Jesus did believe that he could overcome evil with good. He could take upon himself the sins of those who cruelly kill him. He could bear the wounds of the cross trusting that the real power was not in the might of cruel Rome or the religious authorities but in the everlasting love of his heavenly Father.

In a world that still trusts more in military might for protection than God, this idea of taking up a cross is still revolutionary.

That's what the Bible means when it says that "by his wounds we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24) The Passion of Christ is a bodily demonstration of real power. It is the power of God's love to overcome evil and violence with love and sacrifice. It is refusing the temptation of the devil to go the way of the world and respond to the violence of our enemies with equal measures of violence and treachery.

Instead, God in Christ takes the pain and guilt upon himself. He suffers for our sins and salvation.

And we too are called to follow on this path. On our own we cannot do this. But, by the power of the Spirit of Christ we are given the strength to overcome temptation and follow his command. We can, as Jesus taught us, deny ourselves, take up a cross and follow him. (Mark 8:34)

To do anything less is to worship the devil instead of God.

THE TEMPTATION OF SECURITY

Finally, the devil tries a third temptation. We read that he takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and tells him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'" Luke 4:9-10 (NRSV)

I think it is significant that this temptation takes place in Jerusalem and on the temple. It is in Jerusalem that Jesus will face the trial and temptation of the cross. It will be a time when he will be (in a manner of speaking) thrown from the pinnacle of the temple. That is, he will be rejected and condemned by the religious and political powers that be.

The question is this, "How will he confront those powers that are bent on destroying him?" The way suggested by the devil is to choose security over everything else. It's at this point that we learn the devil can quote Scripture too. He says, "God's angels are there to protect you. It's their job."

Many commentators suggest that the three temptations of Christ revolve around three basic human needs, the need for food, the need for power and the need for self-preservation. Certainly none of these things are bad in and of themselves. But, if we elevate these basic needs over God's will, they can become idolatrous temptations.

If Jesus had chosen self protection over the cross, it would have been a popular choice. There are many who would have been willing to follow him on that path. Indeed, there are many in the church today who think that self-preservation and securing the praise of others are our highest goals.

But, they are wrong. Those are not goals. They are temptations.

Jesus could have easily seized upon this Scripture quoted by the devil as a way of escaping the hard road that was His holy destiny. But, Jesus refused to do that. He knew that his role in life was not to put his heavenly Father to the test (v. 12) but to follow the path set before him.

That path would lead Jesus into the wilderness many times. That path would eventually lead Jesus to a cross in Jerusalem.

THE JOURNEY OF LENT

And that is the path that we take with Jesus once again in this season of Lent. As he was in the wilderness 40 days so we take 40 days to prepare ourselves. We learn that life is not just about food or power or security. We learn to listen not to our own desires but to the voice of God.

We often quote Scripture like the devil. We use Scripture to meet our needs and justify what we want. I think that we need to quote Scripture less and listen to Scripture more.

This is my challenge for you during this season of Lent. Don't worry so much about those whom you perceive to be enemies and the threats that seem to surround your life daily. Don't worry so much about the material things of life.

Worry about God's word, God's personal word to you.

Where is God calling you to go? What is God calling you to do? What is God calling you to give up so that you might embrace the kingdom of God?

Prepare yourself for the test of a lifetime. God's salvation does draw near.

Amen.