

“The Path: The Starting Line”

10 March 2019: 1st Sunday in Lent

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 4:1-13

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“There is more integrity in doing the ‘wrong’ thing for the right reason than in doing the ‘right’ thing for the wrong reason” (—Scott Fullmer).

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An engineer, a psychologist, and a minister were hunting in northern Canada. They came to an isolated cabin, removed from any town. The hunters knocked to ask permission to warm up and rest. No one answered, but they saw the cabin unlocked, so they entered. The owner had simply furnished the cabin with a minimum of equipment. Nothing was remarkable about the cabin except someone had suspended in midair a large, potbellied cast iron stove by wires attached to the ceiling beams.

“Fascinating,” said the psychologist. “Obviously, this lonely trapper, isolated from humanity, elevated his stove so that he can curl up under it and vicariously return to the months before his was born.”

“Nonsense,” said the engineer. “This man is practicing sound thermodynamics. By elevating his stove, he is able to distribute heat more evenly throughout the cabin.”

“With all due respect,” interrupted the minister, “I’m sure that hanging his stove from the ceiling has religious meaning. Fire *lifted up* has been a religious symbol for centuries.” They debated the issue at length without resolution. When the owner/trapper returned, they instantly asked why he had hung his heavy potbellied stove by wires from the ceiling. His succinct answer: “Had plenty of wire, not much stove pipe” (Tom Mullin III, “Merry, Full of Grace,” *Circuit Rider*, March/April Issue, 1998, p.16).

A great danger in reading scripture is to read it merely in our own image. Plainly, this kind of reading is important if a lesson from scripture is to be relevant to us. Yet, at times, by making everything relevant to us, we miss a deeper import. Grasping what Luke suggests about temptation and testing is a case in point. There are at least two dangers in dealing with this Lucan text.

First, there is a tendency to so objectify the devil that he (or she?) lurks behind every tree. This devil comes to us “in the details,” “with a red dress on,” “made me do it,” or is “in the Exorcist.” Perhaps, it is always easier to see where the devil has been, then where the devil is now. The danger in making the devil an object is that the devil becomes manageable. The principalities/powers the devil represents become something we can either avoid or defeat. Yet, this reduces the problem of evil to a matter of recognition. If we can see the devil, then we are safe from the devil’s wiles.

A second and different way to address the problem of the devil or evil is to declare that it is a figment of an overactive imagination. This modern tactic suggests that basically the Devil does not exist. Rather, someone fabricated the Devil to answer questions about the nature of human life that we cannot otherwise explain. This explanation reminds me of the salesperson that came to a house with a young boy sitting on the porch. He asked the boy if his father was home. The boy said yes, but that he was very sick. The salesperson said, “He isn’t really sick, he just thinks he’s sick.” The next week the salesperson asked the boy, sitting on the same porch, how his father was. The boy replied, “Now he

thinks he is dead.” Sometimes evil exists no matter how we name it. Neither devising the devil or evil as absolutely concrete, nor denying its existence, is particularly helpful in coming to terms with it.

Luke’s Gospel lesson today is traditional: the temptation of Jesus. We use the temptation story on the first Sunday in Lent each year. Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. The word “Lent” comes from an Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning “spring.” This liturgical/worship season prepares us to celebrate Easter. By tradition, Lent begins a period of fasting/preparation for baptism by converts and also penance by all Christians. Lent 1 describes Jesus’ temptation by Satan (*The UM Book of Worship*, UMPH, Nashville, TN, 1992, p. 320). Hear Luke:

[4:1] Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, [2] where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. [3] The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” [4] Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone’.’”

[5] Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. [6] And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. [7] If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’.’”

[9] Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, [10] for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ [11] and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone’.’”

[12] Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’.’ [13] When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time (Luke 4:1-13).

We all have a problem with temptation. It is a given in life where human choice is real. Too often we fail to grasp temptation’s seduction. Thus, we address temptation in one of two ways. First, we discount the evil that is in the world by dismissing the power of darkness represented in the scripture by the character of the devil. After all, we are the products of the modern scientific age. So, we think that if we have never seen the devil, then the powers that the devil represents are not genuine.

Second, if we imagine the devil as a red-suited character with a pointed tail and a pitch-fork, then few today take this depiction seriously. Rather, I suggest that the Bible reminds us that the devil is both seductive and subtle. Genesis describes the serpent, in a devil-like portrayal: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made” (Genesis 3:1). The KJV uses “subtle” rather than crafty, but with matching effect. The danger is that both temptation and the tempter are crafty and subtle—in short, seductive. Notice that Jesus’ temptations are all certainly good in themselves—**bread, political power, and proof/evidence of God’s reality**. Bread is good in a hungry world. Jesus having political power would be something to celebrate indeed. To know God’s existence beyond faith is certainly a tempting proposition to a world nurtured on the milk of the scientific method. With no hesitation, we notice, that Jesus rejects each temptation promptly. Why?

Jesus rejects the first temptation, stones to bread, because miracles alone do not feed God's people. Jesus rejects the second temptation, all political power, because to provide real justice to the human family, we must be part of its structure. Jesus rejects the third temptation, putting God to the test, because of all Israel's sins, this was the one which disappointed God most completely. Jesus understood what Israel often forgot: God alone is God. End of discussion. Period.

The instant any of us embark on work that addresses our fellow humans at the core and depths of being where God and sin and holiness are at issue, we become at that same moment subject to countless dangers, interferences, pretenses, and errors. We would have been quite safe otherwise. So-called "spiritual work" exposes us to spiritual sins. Temptations of the flesh, difficult as they are to resist, are at least easy to detect. Temptations of the spirit usually show up disguised as invitations to virtue. When tempted, it is a temptation at the points of our strength, not at the point of our weakness. So, please remember these valuable words about the devil:

He can tempt, deceive, accuse, and attack us, but he cannot force us to do something against our wills. We cannot truthfully say, "The devil made me do it."

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