

February 16, 2018

“Lent 1 and Luke”

Because our chief Gospel for year B of the Lectionary is Mark and because Mark does not have a temptation story of Jesus per se, I would like for us to consider Luke this first week in Lent. Luke 4:1-13 opens Lent for us and I suggest reading this text as a devotional. Instead of recounting each of the three temptations, that is—the temptation to turn a stone into bread, a temptation to worship something besides God, and the temptation to test God—I ask that we consider one implication of these temptations together. Contrary to popular opinion, people regularly are tempted at their points of strength and not tempted at their points of weakness.

Good athletes, for example, may be tempted to glide by on talent, whether size or speed, and not live out the hours of disciplined practice required of less gifted persons. Or take the example of people enjoying good looks? These folks can charm their way through life and rarely require the work crucial to success as do other, plain looking people. Finally, we all know students who possess superior intelligence and never have to crack a book to make good grades and advance in their field of endeavor. But the question: Do you want a smart doctor who skated by in medical school?

Notice Jesus’ temptations are plainly good things—bread, political power, and proof of God’ existence. 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. Yet also notice that Jesus rejects each temptation without hesitation. Why?

Jesus rejects the first temptation, a stone 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, people 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 Yahweh/God most. Jesus understood what Israel often forgot: God alone is God. End of discussion. Period.

The moment that any of us embarks on work that deals with 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 that we would have been quite safe from 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 (Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant; an Exploration of Vocational Holiness*, Wm. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI p. 113).

When we are tempted as people, we are tempted at the points of our strength, not at the point of our weakness. To understand the power of temptation is to have some power over temptation. Too often we think of temptation as being tricked by a character in a red suit, pointed tail, and a trident. Temptation, however, is much more subtle than that. Thus, our Lenten prayer for all of us is that we do not take lightly the power to do the wrong for what we recognize is the right reason. Luke reminds us of this truth.