

**Lent 1, 2010-- Luke 4:1-13 Randall Prior Feb.21, 2010**

Prayer.

The boy was told by his concerned father, “Son, don’t swim in that canal, it treacherous.” “OK ,Dad”, came the reply. But the youngster came home that evening carrying a wet bathing suit. “Where have you been?” demanded the father. “Swimming in the canal,” replied the boy. “Didn’t I tell you not to swim there?” “Yes sir.” the boy said. “Well, why did you ? “ “Well Dad, I had my bathing suit with me and I couldn’t resist the temptation.” “And why,” the father asked “did you have your bathing suit with you?” To which the son said: “So I’d be prepared to swim in case I was tempted.”

Temptation is not a simple matter because it always involves our mixed motives and desires, the things that compel and fascinate us, and the secret longings we have that mobilize our ability to rationalize and justify. Most of all temptation has to do with the parts of ourselves and our actions that hold some promise of good but somehow in the process get misdirected or twisted. The possibility of doing good can only exist in the presence of its flip side, shadow reality that holds the possible transgression. The two are much closer together than we like to think and straying from one side to another easier than imagined.

In the temptation story which is found in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus has left the scene of his baptism and goes into the wilderness near Jericho to spend forty days in the wilderness in fasting, prayer,

and self discovery. The desert had forever been a place for that, a place of transformation, searching, and centering. Israel wandered in the desert wilderness seeking for the Promised Land. Jesus now determines his own course in ministry through this time of testing and temptation. He looks at all the possibilities for power and popularity and for serving others and making a difference. He looks at all the things in life that could seduce him into abandoning his mission for a different course that would serve self and other ends. He looks at where he might put his trust and whom he will worship and serve.

It is not that God is tempting him to fall or fail but that the ways of the world that run so deliciously close to God's own purposes and call have to be dealt with and distinguished. In this dialogue with the devil on the Mt. of Temptation Jesus is first asked to turn a stone into bread. Feed others, be relevant. He is offered all glory and authority over the kingdoms of the world if he will but worship the devil. And finally he is asked to give some flashy miraculous show of faith by leaping from the pinnacle of the temple and letting the angels save him. He is asked simply to trust what the psalmist in verses 11-12 of today's psalm says is an act of faith.

With the exception of worshipping Satan, Jesus in the course of his ministry does similar things to those he was tempted to do by the devil. He changes water into wine and multiplies loaves and fish to feed people. He performs miraculous acts of healing and raises the dead that are flashy and

attention getting indeed, and he is acclaimed as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the one who rules a kingdom not of this world but God's eternal kingdom which is over all. Each of these temptations is something that Jesus did eventually for the good but without sacrificing his faith or integrity. In each case Jesus refutes the power of evil by referring to the authority of the Scriptural story for his life and to experience of the people of Israel in the wilderness. It is a source of strength for the struggle with evil and brokenness.

There are a couple of significant things about the way Jesus deals with temptation. First of all he avoids what psychologists call the "fish in the net syndrome." That is dealing with temptation with a mighty and righteous struggle to deny and destroy it. Like fish caught in the net it is often those who struggle the hardest that get the most enmeshed and trapped by it. So Jesus in dealing with the devil avoids the direct frontal assault with a determination toward annihilating the tempter. Rather, he diverts his attention from the temptation to the purpose or the persons who need to be served in the process. He does not deny temptation or even its potential hold on him but rather yields them and himself to God. He sees the pull of these things in light of holy love and God's call and claim upon his life. In a sense Jesus submits to these temptations by not fighting to destroy them in himself but rather admitting their influence and diverting his attention from that path.

In short, Jesus accepts and honors the freedom that God gives and has made an order of creation for humans. He accepts the tantalizing pull of the choice but he doesn't let it rule his thoughts or his focus.

Author Philip Yancey wrote some years ago of this passage and said: "In the temptation Satan dangled before Jesus a speeded up way of accomplishing his mission. He could dazzle the crowds with his ability to create food on demand, protect himself from danger, and take control of the kingdoms of the world. Christ's refusal offered Satan a new lease on life. The fact the Jesus had not come to annihilate evil by force meant that Satan had survived a direct confrontation and removed an immediate threat."

But Jesus was not drawn into that final conflict in the interests of freedom and in the interest of acts motivated by love would always sustain people better than acts motivated by a desire to destroy. This "miracle of restraint" as Dostoyevsky and others have pointed out is exercised so that human freedom may prevail and so that power will not force love but rather seek it from within those who have a choice.

Yancey comments that God's dependence on human choice might seem to some to be an abdication or a failure to punish evil or take the active role in the world we would wish. We want quick and spectacular answers to our prayers, healing for our diseases and maladies, and protection for those we love. A God we can point to and say: God will take care of it....

But that eliminates the struggle and the choice and drains from life the freedom for us to be the humans we were created to be. And so we live with good and evil close together and something to be struggled with. We live having to discern within ourselves the ambiguity of our motivations and come to terms with the agony of having to choose. It is that journey through the wilderness of life that is perennially ours and it is the love of God that surrounds us and sustains us as we seek to find our way.

AMEN.