

February 21, 2010, the First Sunday of Lent

Luke 4: 1-13, The Temptations of Jesus

WE ARE WEAK BUT HE IS STRONG

Every day we see stories on the news about a celebrity or a politician falling to temptations to cheat, to abuse their position or fame, to claim to be above the law, or any number of other sins. Tiger Woods felt entitled to many mistresses. Governor Mark Sanford didn't see anything wrong with having both a wife and a "soul mate." Movie and tv stars seem to do just about anything they want. It seems the ends justify any means, and the ends are often very questionable in themselves.

It seems that too many people in positions of power and fame fall to the temptations of greed and more power and carnal pleasures. One temptation leads to another. Sins tend to accumulate.

Of course, people who have fame and political power are not the only ones who fall into temptation. It's just that they are much more visible.

When other people, ordinary people like us, for instance, fail to resist temptation, paparazzi are not following them around, hoping for a picture or a sound bite. Most of us at least have our privacy when it comes to our weaknesses! But all of us face temptation, and all of us fall into the trap of sin.

Jesus faced temptations that were similar to the temptations we face every day. Now, I know that not many of us are tempted to turn stones into bread, because we don't know how to do that. But we are tempted to eat too much food just because it tastes good, satisfying not only our hunger but our desire for sensual pleasure.

This temptation is one side of the temptation to satisfy all of our desires of every kind, leaving us unable to tell ourselves no to anything we want, even if it's just a passing fancy.

It's the same for Jesus' temptation to rule the whole world, to be in control over everything that he could see. This was a very real temptation for Jesus, one that I think he must have faced right up to the end, because so many of the oppressed people he was ministering to expected him to rule the world!

It must have been tempting to give the people what they wanted and ---oh, by the way----not have to die on the cross!

For most of us, we couldn't rule the whole world even if we wanted to, but that doesn't mean we don't give in to the temptation to grab all the power we can in our own smaller worlds of home or school or work. We tend to call people "control freaks" and "micromanagers" if we are affected by their behavior, but many of us fall to the same temptation.

We don't like to feel like we have no choice, no control over our lives, but we sure don't mind having some control over the lives of other people!

The third temptation is the most insidious one. After Jesus resisted the first two temptations by quoting scripture, the devil catches on and uses scripture for his own purpose---to literally get Jesus to fall ----- to jump off the top of the Temple. After all, as the devil points out, scripture says that God will send his angels so that you won't hurt your foot on a stone, so he certainly won't let you fall to your death!

The problem is that the devil is taking the scripture out of context and twisting the meaning. He is quoting Psalm 91, which does NOT refer to the Messiah. What it's saying is that God will protect the faithful. It is an ironic misuse of the passage that the devil is using it to tempt Jesus to be unfaithful when it is written to encourage people to be faithful!

Jesus knows his scripture so well that he understands that! There is no contradiction between the devil's proposition and Jesus' quote from Deuteronomy that "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." Jesus is using the scripture properly, interpreting it the way it was meant, while the devil is using it for his own purposes.

We, on the other hand, don't often know scripture well enough to know when it's being misused and misinterpreted, and so we fall prey to following what we THINK it means or what someone has told us it means. We don't bother to read enough of the verses before or after a particular passage and we don't bother to find out the setting so that we can better understand the text.

We might know what the words mean, but if we don't know what they mean in context, we can come to the wrong conclusion about what it means for our lives.

Being lax in our reading of scripture and thinking we can understand on the basis of a very surface-level reading is a temptation that can put God to the test. Intentionally or not, we are relying on him to catch us when we get it wrong; we think he will set us straight somehow and not let us fall.

Jesus, on the other hand, was brought up steeped in scripture. Some scholars think that he, like many other Jewish boys of that time, had memorized the entire Torah, the first five books of our Bible--- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy----and not only memorized the words but had studied enough to know how to interpret them!

And so he knew not only which passage answered which temptation, but he also knew when the devil was perverting the meaning of scripture.

Jesus knew the big picture. He knew the word of God well enough as a whole to know what it was that God would want him to do without hesitation.

And so Jesus walks away from the devil, strong even though he hasn't eaten for forty days. And the devil has to wait to try another time.

By the way, Lent is 40 days long. Can you imagine not eating until Easter? If you did that, I think there had better be some kind of major feast on Easter!!

So---- how did Jesus stay so strong? Yes, he was the son of God, but he was also human like us and he needed to eat and drink to stay strong and healthy.

We know how hard it is to make good choices and remember **anything**, much less the passage of scripture that perfectly answers the problem at hand when we're tired and hungry, much less nearly starved, the way Jesus was after 40 days of no food!

So how did he do it? How did he keep his brain functioning without his pomegranate juice and his ginkgo biloba? How did he even stand up without his carbs and his bottled water for forty days?

Luke tells us the answer. He says that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had led him in the wilderness for 40 days, and the Spirit was still with him as he felt the devil's pull to first take care of himself by making bread out of stones, then the lure of taking over the world, and finally the draw of being famous, of gaining recognition for himself by requiring God to protect him from harm.

The Spirit gave him strength and wisdom and power to resist temptation.

Jesus did not rely on his own strength any more than we can rely on ours. Jesus constantly drew upon the power of the Holy Spirit.

And we can do the same.

Jesus regularly took time apart to pray, to call upon the power of the Holy Spirit, and to listen to the voice of his father.

And we can do the same.

We don't know everything about the way Jesus prayed but we do know he didn't just say a few words over his meals before he ate and listen politely to the prayers said in worship services.

In Luke 6:12 we read that before Jesus chose the twelve apostles, he went up on the mountain and spent the **WHOLE NIGHT** in prayer. Matthew tells us that after he fed the 5000 he withdrew to a place by himself and spent time in prayer. Afterward he walked on water to join the apostles in the boat! I think that had something to do with the power of the Holy Spirit!

We may never find ourselves able to walk on water, but we can spend time in prayer and be filled with the Holy Spirit!

How did Jesus spend hours and hours, even all night in prayer?? It seems like we get bored or restless after only a few minutes, so what did he do after saying thank you for the food and good health and asking for healing for this list of people and help of other kinds for this second list of people?

Simple. It was a conversation! Jesus listened at least as much as he talked! How do I know?

Because Jesus always came away from his prayer times with renewed energy, despite often praying for hours and even all night!

Because in the garden of Gethsemane the night he was arrested he pleaded for the plan to change so that he would be spared the agonizing death of crucifixion. If he hadn't listened and finally accepted God's answer, maybe he would have left Jerusalem and disappeared back into the wilderness. He listened to God's answer that there was only one way to accomplish what he had come to do. The answer was that the cross was inescapable.

He LISTENED! He spoke to God, yes, but God also spoke to him.

God still speaks to us today. God speaks to us through scripture, but that requires spending time reading it! The Bible can teach us a great deal about God and the timeless truths that are God's wisdom and word, but it can't do that unless we spend time getting to know what is written there!

Jesus knew scripture well, better than the vast majority of us do, but that did not preclude the necessity for him to pray. It provided him with a foundation, a knowledge, a context for his life, especially for his prayer life.

So one way to listen to God is to read the Bible, but the second way is to develop a prayer life that emulates the prayer life of Jesus.

Last week I spent some time walking you through a couple of methods for praying----breath prayer and lectio divina, that is, praying through a scripture passage.

Both of these are ways to just BE in the presence of God, listening for his voice.

Too often when we pray we bring our list of requests and intercessions. We ask for this and that, and we pray for this person and that person. It's almost like bringing our shopping list to God and when we have checked off all the requests and all the names, we say "Amen" and stop.

We forget to listen. We forget to give God a turn in the conversation.

I believe that the way that Jesus could be in prayer for hours at a time was that he MOSTLY listened! He was quiet and let God do the talking.

I hope that a few of you have tried the prayer methods I showed you last week and then described in the e-mail I sent out. I also went over them last night at the spiritual growth class at the parsonage. If you spent time trying this, please let me know how you felt about it. If you have any questions, please ask.

There are other prayer methods that I will be teaching over the next three months during this class, so if you are interested, I encourage you to come on the first and third Saturdays at 7:00.

If that time doesn't work for you, talk to me and let's find a time for another class meeting that does work for you!

God has given us the Holy Spirit to strengthen us in our weakness, to keep us from temptation, but we need to hear what the Holy Spirit is telling us. The only way to do that is to listen to the word of God in scripture and in prayer.

Lent is a good time to make the sacrifice of time to listen to God's word in scripture and in prayer. Make the commitment to listen! What you hear just might change your life!

Amen!