

Lead Us Not Into Temptation

A Sermon on Luke 4: 1-13 by Rich Holmes

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I think it is usually the case that when some pastor gives a sermon on temptation, somewhere in that sermon they say that all of us at some time or another face temptation. “After all, even Jesus was tempted by Satan,” they say, and then they usually tell the story that we have in our gospel lesson for today. I guess that’s not a bad way to preach about temptation. If you believe that Jesus was tempted I think this belief will likely give you comfort and encouragement when you face temptations of your own.

But what if on the other hand, you have a hard time believing that Jesus was tempted. You could easily see how we can all be tempted. After all, we are not like Jesus. We, after all, are imperfect; we are sinners; we are flawed. But our Lord is not like us. So how could it be possible for our Lord to be tempted?

Well, as the story goes, when Satan met our Lord in the desert after our Lord had been fasting for forty days, he said three things to Jesus to tempt him into disobeying God. First, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” Next, he took Jesus to a high place and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and said “If you worship me, all this will be yours.” Finally, he took him to the top of the temple in Jerusalem and said “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up on their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

What is it that these three attempts to lead our Lord astray have in common? What they have in common is that in none of them is Satan trying to lead our Lord into doing anything

which is obviously wrong, obviously wicked or obviously evil. In fact each of these attempts involves things which seem pretty good, don't they? "Command these stones to become bread." Jesus had been fasting for a long time and Satan came to him as someone who seems to care about him, to even love him. "You look hungry. Feed yourself. There's a stone, use your power to make it become bread."

"I will give you authority over all the kingdoms of the world. If you worship me it will all be yours." Shouldn't our Lord have all the kingdoms of the world? Isn't that the goal of Christianity to have everyone know Jesus' name, to worship him and to give him their absolute allegiance? Finally when Satan commanded Jesus to throw himself off the top of the temple he even quoted scripture. "It is written 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up on their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

It may be hard to believe that our Lord who was perfect could be tempted by the devil, but if the devil didn't come to him as the devil, but as one who was full of goodness and love, then why wouldn't he be tempted? How could he avoid being tempted?

I thought about not telling this story because of the tragic events in Florida this week, and I was afraid this story would hit a little too close to home. But then I also said to myself perhaps there is no better time to tell it, for what else is the gospel about except things that hit close to home. Well, the story goes like this. There was a man named Gary who was spending some time as an American tourist and was travelling through the South American jungle one day, and as he had a machete and cut his way through the thick green jungle in what he thought was miles and miles from civilization, all of the sudden he found himself in a village. And there in the

village it appeared that there was some trouble. An army platoon was in town and they all had their sub-machine guns loaded to the teeth and the entire village, men, women and children were all lined up against the wall. Apparently what had happened was that this platoon was a familiar sight around the village. Whenever this platoon was off duty they would come out to this remote village and they would kidnap a couple of the teenage girls in the village. The girls would resist, of course, but how much could they resist, really? These soldiers were all grown men with imposing physiques who were armed with pistols, machine guns, you name it. And then the soldiers would do things you wouldn't want to imagine with these girls and dump them back in the village a couple of days later when they were through with them. Well, this went on once, twice, three times, and then finally after the third time, the village priest called the entire community together in the local church and he said to them, "Brothers and sisters, enough is enough! We know that these soldiers will be back, and when they come back, we're not going to allow this to happen again. We're going to resist." And so they did. The soldiers came back a fourth time and the entire village resisted by throwing rocks and using clubs and whatever they could find. They also hid the girls, but as you have probably already suspected, the soldiers found the girls and quickly put down the resistance. But they were angered by this little uprising and they decided that they were going to massacre the villagers. So they lined them all up against the wall, and this is what the American tourist Gary wondered into.

So here is what happened. The army commander who led the platoon decided that because Gary was an honored guest in this village, that he would let Gary have a choice. Gary was handed a pistol, and with that pistol he could either shoot the ring leader of the resistance, the town priest, and in his honor the army commander would allow all the women and children

in the village go free, and he would only kill the men. But, if Gary elected not to shoot the priest he would kill everyone in the village, including the women and children of whom there were dozens. Now, of course, as you have probably already imagined, Gary thought to himself why don't I use this pistol to shoot the soldiers and free the villagers. Well, that works in the movies, but as you have again probably already imagined, that wasn't possible, so outnumbered was Gary with his little pistol up against an entire army platoon. So did he shoot the priest or didn't he? What was he to do?

One time when I was in Seminary a friend of mine was asked to preach at a church without a pastor about two hours south of where we went to school. And as she was traveling she went down some lonely country roads early in the morning so she could reach this church in time, but when she was about half way to her destination she came across the scene of an accident on the side of the road. A car was wrapped around a tree. Now it was clear that the accident had just happened, there was smoke coming out of the engine of the car, and radiator fluid pouring onto the highway. Well, she drove by and she started to stop, but she kept going for about a mile, because she told herself "I don't have time to stop, I have to go preach God's word." But then a little voice reminded her of how wrong that would be. "What good are you doing to preach God's word if you don't live out the words that you preach." So she went back, and she called 9-1-1 and she stayed with the person who was seriously injured and barely conscious until they could medivac him to a hospital. And when she arrived at the church, she was of course quite late, but people were still there and she explained what had happened, and everyone joined in a prayer for the person who was injured.

Now, if most people handed you a pistol and told you to go shoot an innocent priest, of course your answer would be no way. And if someone said to you ignore all the people who are in accidents on the side of the road, you wouldn't do that. But how many of us could be tempted to do something like that in the name of saving other lives, how many of us could be tempted to do one of these things in the name of duty.

You see when someone tries to get us to do something that is harmful or dangerous by presenting it to us as something harmful or dangerous, most of us aren't going to follow along. Some of us will follow along. But we have a name for such people. We call them "sociopaths" and "psychopaths", and we say they are "maladjusted". But most of us won't follow along. But what if they dress it up as something that is good for us, something that is intended to help us or something that is done in the name of something good? That's when we can all be tempted. That's when even our Lord who was perfect can be tempted.

So if it is so easy for even good people, even well-meaning people to be led astray and tempted like this, then what do we do? Well, one thing we can do is just give up. You may say "What's the point in trying to live a good life if in fact I get nowhere doing it? If I can be so easily confused, so easily misled, why don't I just live my life for me and say to heck with everybody else?" Well, you can do that, I suppose. But I think that anyone who would give up quite so easily doesn't really care about living for God and for their neighbor anyway. If you suspect that those who complain that it is too hard to know what's right are just trying to make an excuse for ignoring what's right, I think your suspicions are correct. And frankly, they aren't making much of an excuse. If you have a problem knowing what's right and being sure about what's right, then maybe you should ask yourself what is your problem compared to the problems of

millions of people in this world? What is your problem compared to the problem that millions of people in this world have who go to bed hungry every night, or who wake up in the morning to the sound of shells exploding and bullets flying outside their window? What is your problem compared to the problem of millions of women who come home every day to husbands who talk to them with their fists, or millions of children who grow up with black eyes and shattered jaws instead of hugs and kisses? Giving up in the face of temptation may be an option, but it is only an option for those who are already selfish and who seek to justify their selfishness.

We now find ourselves at the beginning of the season of Lent, and in Lent as we prepare to follow our Lord on his journey to the cross, we go through a period of reflecting on all the ways that we sin and all the things we need to change and repent of. We reflect on the ways in which we can be selfish, the ways we can be inconsiderate, the ways in which we can be lazy, or uncaring, or ungrateful, or abusive and the list goes on and on. But not only do we reflect on the ways in which we can sin, we also reflect on the ways we can be tempted to sin and we think of ways we can avoid these temptations. And as we reflect on these temptations, it is of course appropriate to think about ways in which we can be tempted to sin for sin's sake. In his Confessions, Saint Augustine famously talked about how when he was a kid he and his friends would steal fruit from a garden, and they would steal the fruit not because they were hungry and wanted to eat it but just because it was wrong and they knew it was wrong. I remember learning a lesson about that when I was a kid, too. I got on a subway with my father in Atlanta, and I had never been on a subway before, and I saw where some passengers, probably teenagers had used a knife and cut through the seat cushions. And I said to my father, "Why would someone do a thing like this?"

“They’d do it because it’s wrong. They’re destroying property just for the sake of destroying property.” We can be tempted to sin just because sin is wrong. There is no denying that. But what is far more dangerous is that we can also be tempted to sin because we convince ourselves that sin is right. And that is what we really have to be on the lookout for.

Maybe you say “That’s no fun. I don’t want to do these things Pastor Rich. I don’t want to spend time reflecting on my sins and my weaknesses and vulnerabilities, for that sounds painful.” But we need to, because I promise you, that all of us here at Northminster, and all of us who follow Christ and are the body of Christ are the one and only hope for this world. And do you really think it could be otherwise? Do you think the Democratic Party or the Republican Party are the real hope for this world? Do you think that celebrities or teen idols are the real hope of this world? Do you think that meditation and self-help manuals and motivational speakers are the real hope for this world? Do you really think that oxycontin or opioids or pot or methamphetamine are the real hope of this world? We are the one and only hope for this world. So don’t be afraid of this journey of self-examination. Don’t be afraid of this journey of Lent.