

Temptation or Technique?

Luke 4.1-13

Lent 1, February 21, 2010

LENT—GIVING IT UP

Lent. Though it's one of those familiar church words, how many of us could give a definition? (I did a straw poll in my household and most of those polled thought it was that stuff that builds up in your belly button over time). Let's unpack some of Lent.

The word itself comes from an Old English word meaning *spring*. But in other Christian traditions and languages "Lent" is called some derivation of the Latin word for 40. In Brazil it is called *quaresma*. Why 40? Because we recognize 40 days of Lent. Why 40 days of Lent? From our scripture this morning—Jesus is said to have spent 40 days in the wilderness. (40 also happens to be a favorite biblical number. Noah was on the ark for 40 days and nights, the Israelites roamed the desert for 40 years, and so on). The season of Lent consists of the 40 days before Easter.

But what *is* Lent? During this span of 40 days we often talk about giving things up, especially food. Again this mirrors our scripture from Luke and Jesus' experience in the desert. This year so far I've heard of people giving up coffee, chocolate and soda. We give things up to remind ourselves that we follow Jesus and to refocus our lives on our walk with him, even to the point of self-sacrifice (even while acknowledging the smallness of these sacrifices).

There is a long tradition of this "giving up" as a spiritual practice. But Lent was not always marked only by fasting, and only very recently did it take the form of fasting some unhealthy food item in which we have a tendency to overindulge. Traditionally, Lent has had just as much to do with giving things "out" as giving things "up". The three traditional practices to be taken up with renewed vigor (implication: we've been doing them all along) during Lent are all justice based: prayer (justice towards God), fasting (justice towards self), and almsgiving or giving to the poor (justice towards neighbor).

We observe Lent as a way to remember Jesus' life and ministry, but also as a way of identifying and imitating his life and ministry. It is a time to rededicate ourselves to living the lives of love, servanthood, self-sacrifice, forgiveness and justice to which we are called.

TEMPTATION OR TECHNIQUE?

In order to deepen and strengthen our collective walk with Jesus this season of Lent, Pam and I will ask some *What if?* questions during our sermon time: *What if* the scriptures we remember each year during Lent had a deeper meaning for our lives than we usually give them? *What if* there was something beyond the surface meaning in these biblical passages? *What if* we plumbed the depths of these writings, their authors, and the setting of their day? And *What if* we then seriously considered the implications for our understanding and lives? Today I would

like to ask: *What if this scripture—commonly referred to as Jesus’ Temptation—was not only about resisting temptation, but also a blueprint for how Jesus would live his life and ministry?*

We know that Jesus overcame temptation and we want to be like Jesus so we too ought to overcome temptation. But, what if this is not just a story of resisting temptation but also a preview of the methods that Jesus would and would not use? Let me explain...

I find this scripture one of the most dramatic and dynamic sections of text in the gospels. It’s easy to picture Jesus sitting cross-legged in the middle of an inhospitable, barren expanse of brown on brown. Rocks strewn about, skin coated with dust and bearing the mark of 40 days under the sun, ribs showing in his sides, hair matted. But a half smile across his face as he communes with God, his Abba (his “daddy”).

But beyond this easily imaginable scene this is also a hinge-point in Jesus’ life. He has just been baptized but has not yet begun his ministry; he has not spoken to crowds, called disciples, healed anyone, or upturned the religious and political powers-that-be. What if, led by the Spirit, this is his vision quest, his cleansing retreat, his strategic planning session?

WIN PEOPLE BY BREAD, COMPROMISE, OR SENSATION?

Think about this: the devil is not offering Jesus inherently evil powers or authority. Each of the temptations had the ability to provide good ends for Jesus’ ministry that lie ahead:

- If Jesus could turn rocks to bread, what a godsend for the impoverished Jesus ministered to, people living on the edge of existence!
- Or if he had the authority to rule the kingdoms of the world imagine the good he could do from such a position—of course he would rule with justice!
- Or the temptation to wow people with his ability to call angels to his rescue as he plummets from the top of the Temple. That would surely win some to God and convince people of God’s goodness and mercy.

But even with the good that each of these powers could provide, each case would have required some misuse of power, some compromise, some distancing from God. But back to my question: If this is not just about temptation, what is the method?

TRUE EXISTENCE COMES IN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

The first part of Jesus’ method exposed in this scripture is the proclamation that we do not exist “by bread alone”. Even if Jesus could have provided food for all, be it through miracle or new farming techniques, he shows that foremost in his method is relationship with God. This is

grounding; this is the reason we fast during Lent (It's not a weight loss scheme!). We fast to remind ourselves that God is more important to our lives even than that which provides for our everyday physical existence.

JUSTICE WILL NOT COME THROUGH POWER BUT THROUGH LOVE

The next part of Jesus' methodology, shown in the temptation to rule the world, is that justice will be won not through the world's power arrangement, but through God's new power arrangement as manifest in Jesus.

Many wonder what they would do if somehow thrust into the Oval Office or Governor's Mansion. They dream of the tremendous good they could accomplish with all of that power. Yet whatever our political stripe we recognize that most politicians begin with noble intentions only to find themselves sucked into political and personal compromise in pursuit of their once pure agenda.

We find Jesus considering a similar offer; the offer of absolute power at the risk of compromise. This was not just about an ego rush; with this power he could reorder the world for the good; set justice in place. But...there was a catch. In order to do so, he must worship the devil by following his ways. Would the ends justify the means?

Author Henry Nouwen shared these thoughts on power and love: "What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life...We have been tempted to replace love with power."¹

Jesus rejects the power to rule saying that his first priority was to serve God. He would not use physical or political power to accomplish his life's call; his method would be one of LOVE.

This is radically insufficient in our minds when we think about justice. Change does not happen this way! We are schooled that in order for change to happen, in order for the cosmic scales of right and wrong to be balanced, good must dominate evil. (E.g. at the end of the movie the bad guy must be punished and at least vanquished, preferably killed.)

This past week U.S., NATO and Afghan forces strengthened their hold on Southern Afghanistan in an operation called Moshtarak, or "togetherness" (in Pashtun?) in an effort to root out the Taliban in that part of the country. Now the Taliban are far from just, but are we really under the illusion that over the long haul strikes like this will bring Moshtarak/togetherness? Jesus was not such an illusion.

¹ Henri Nouwen in Mornings with Henri J.M. Nouwen, quoted in Christianity Today, February 8, 1999, 72

Many of us had hoped that a change in the Oval Office would equate to a change in our military habits as a nation, but that is yet to materialize. Including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq President Obama's newest budget proposes \$708.3 for the things that make for war. Even as our debt goes up and a freeze is recommended in many other spending areas, the military remains one of our most sacred priorities. Regarding that \$700 billion plus, David Radcliff of New Community Project gives us this image: If you take \$1000 bills and start laying them end to end, you will encircle the globe, not once, not twice, not thrice, but four times.

The way of violent power is not the way that the one we know as the great redeemer will bring balance and redemption. We know Jesus will confront the powers. Jesus will use another method, that of LOVE.

NOT BY SENSATION BUT BY SERVICE

The final method Jesus will use comes to light as he is challenged to throw himself from the top of the tower—if he is really so special surely God will save him. William Barclay says the devil's third offer was the temptation to win people by sensation. But Jesus recognizes real transformation will not be won through party tricks or smooth talk. Jesus' final method is the way of service. He will not call upon God and angels to serve him for the sake of proving he can do it. Instead he will seek to serve. He will spend the rest of his life for others, even bending to wash feet.

A NEW POWER ARRANGEMENT

We see this story is more than temptations as Jesus unveils his methodology. What we see is the beginning of Jesus establishing a new power arrangement.

- A new power arrangement that does not curry favor or popularity through bribe or favor (like bread for the hungry).
- A new power arrangement that does not rule through dominance or succeed because of political power that will squash you if you don't acquiesce.
- A new power arrangement that puts service before sensation.

None of these former ways are what will change the world. But a different way will; a new power arrangement that uses the methods of Relationship with God, love, and service.

And so begins our Lenten journey and our desire to follow Jesus and his methods in love, service and relationship with God. We seek to imitate Jesus and create new power arrangements in our lives that will also radiate into the worlds around us. This is our Lenten journey.