

**Sermon: Encountering the Tempter****Scripture: Luke 4:1-13****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 6, 2022**

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We begin Lent with the temptations – “I got sunshine, on a cloudy day! When it’s cold outside, I’ve got the month of May. I guess, you’d say, what can make me feel this way? My Girl.”

No, no, not those temptations, the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness is how we begin Lent. I guess, you’d say, every year we begin this way. And why is that? It’s cause of Our God... or actually, it’s because of our hearts and what Saint Augustine referred to as the disordered loves therein. “The essence of sin,” he said, “is disordered love.” When our hearts desire in a primary way what is only secondary, when we love ultimately what is only peripheral, when we cling to what is passing, when we treat auxiliary things as though they are the essential things our loves are disordered.

It’s so human, somehow deeply threaded through us, part and parcel of who we are. Christian tradition refers to the abiding nature of our disordered loves as Original Sin. And if you don’t much go in for the doctrine of original sin, many of us more liberal Christians lean into Matthew Fox’s Original Blessing, and that’s fine, but we still have to account for the fact that in the world and in our hearts there is this persistent, incorrigible human capacity to fall short of our ideals and very often to fall far FAR short of them. Why when we have a sense of true north do we so often veer of course? Why when we believe in the sanctity of life do we harm and destroy it? Why when we desire truth do we so often lie or

hedge it? It's almost as though we are lured away or deceived somehow away from what is good and true and right.

That's how the Bible presents it to some extent, that there is an active force working against human flourishing and whether we think of that literally or metaphorically the lived experience of it, I think is hard to dismiss. And as we enter into what we call the penitential season of Lent, this 6 weeks leading up to Holy Week and Easter, we wade right into these waters and read of Jesus in wilderness encountering the Tempter or the Deceiver and we are invited to consider how the desires of our hearts become disordered, to offer that disordered-ness to God and to pray that our desire may become re-ordered again unto God's love.

And Jesus will be our guide as we consider his encounter with the Deceiver, the Father of Lies, and we see at least 3 important things which can help us recognize our own temptations and course correct for our disordered loves during this season of Lent. Cause what we witness from Jesus' encounter, and what we can expect from our own, is that his temptations were:

1. Very personal,
2. Very subtle,
3. Very relentless.

First of all, The Tempter or Deceiver meets Jesus in the wilderness and immediately gets very personal. Remember what happens just before this – Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan and hears God say to him “You are *my* son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Then Jesus is driven into the wilderness for

this time of fasting and prayer. The Tempter, after giving Jesus time to get hungry and vulnerable out there – “he ate nothing for those days and became famished,” it says in verse 2 – goes right for that most intimate and personal spiritual experience that Jesus just had and says “So IF you are the Son of God”... in other words “ok, “Son of God” that’s a big thing to claim, are you sure you heard it correctly? How about a little proof of that? Surely your father wouldn’t want you hungry, turn these stones into bread. Oh and “You are beloved” by God? You sure about that? How about throwing yourself down from the temple and seeing just how much God loves you?

I think the Tempter here goes for a core wound in Jesus. Remember Joseph was not Jesus’ real father, there was scandal around his birth? Joseph likely died early in Jesus’ life cause we don’t hear about him afterward and I just wonder if that was a grief, a deep-seated wound in Jesus’ heart, the question of who was his father and what it meant to have a father and be a son. And I wonder if hearing God say at his baptism “You are my son” was profoundly healing for him. And “you are beloved” was in some deep way what Jesus alone needed to hear and believe above all else – his father saying you are MY son and well loved. I would guess that was Jesus’ tender spot? And, it’s exactly where the Tempter goes.

It’s there for all of us, those tender spots, the place of early and primary wounding. We all have our particular hurt or grief within, that either we came into the world with or where we were wounded at a very early age.

The Enneagram which is a sort of Myers Briggs personality inventory that some of you know, suggests that there are fundamentally 9 types of personalities that we humans develop to address our basic wounding and the core fear that results – so the Enneagram 1 or the Perfectionist, for instance, has a core wound

where they have come to doubt their goodness and so their drive is to be perfect and perfectly good to address that wound and they fear being bad reflects deeply and completely on who they are. Those who are of the Enneagram type 6 have a core wound of being abandoned without support and so their drive is to grasp at authority and not trust themselves but to always look for outside guidance and affirmation. Just to give you two examples.

The idea is that we each have uniquely tender and painful spots of vulnerability that drive us and determine us more than we know and it's there where we can most easily get thrown off course and lose our sense of true north. Or you might say that the Tempter has a special way of fingering that spot in us to get us to grasp for a fix to that gaping wound that exacerbates it instead of healing it. For the Enneagram 9 personality type, for instance, the peacemaker, the temptation is to opt above all else for comfort and easefulness, believing that being accommodating will bring him the love he most needs and how this becomes a disordered love - in Augustinian terms - is when he runs rough shod over truth and honesty, for instance, in an effort to please and pacify.

It's very personal and specific to our various personality types, just how our lives become disordered and how we each fall into sin and separation. And such temptations are much more problematic than how the church has traditionally defined temptations as sexual deviancy and wrong beliefs and impure living. Living the straight and narrow doesn't necessarily help us avoid temptations but just buries them to where they are harder to notice...which brings me to point 2.

The Tempter not only tempt us in ways that are deeply personal to ourselves, to our core wounds and needs, but the temptations are very subtle. It's not like the Devil tempts Jesus to do bad things, it's that he tempts Jesus with

the things that Jesus wants badly. He wants to be loved, he wants to be a son, he wants to save the world. The Deceiver does not tempt him with drink or violence, he tempts Jesus with good things – you know how many people you could feed by turning stones into bread, how many people you could help from the seat of power in Rome?! The Tempter asks what do you most want, what is your heart's desire, let's run with that and I'll turn it ever so slightly so at first it looks good and holy but eventually that good desire as it becomes all important can become a point of pride if you get it or point of anger if you are thwarted from it or place of envy if others are doing it better. You see how it works?

Father Thomas Keating who developed the Christian practice of Centering Prayer that we've practiced here in this congregation speaks of there being 3 emotional centers by which we are motivated. If we have a negative thought or are in a negative spin, struggling with something deeply in our spirits – anger or fear or resentment or anxiety for instance - Keating suggests we see how it arises out of a desire for 1. Power and control, or 2. Affection and esteem, or 3. Safety and security or survival. It's likely coming from one of those three emotional centers. They are not bad things in and of themselves but our clinging to them, grasping at them, our making these secondary things primary causes problems. You might say that the Tempter would have us grasping at power and control in a situation when we should be letting go and trusting in God. The Tempter would have us seeking affection in a situation where we should really be seeking truthfulness. The Tempter would have us pursuing our own security regardless of the cost to someone else's. That's the subtlety of how we are tempted towards sin. Thomas Keating in the Welcome Prayer encourages us to pray in instances of stress "I let go of my desire for power and control, I let go of

my desire for affection and esteem, I let go of my desire for safety and security” and then to rest in God. Try it. It’s a remarkable mantra when we sense ourselves spinning out and can help us stay on center, at least for the time being...

Finally, Jesus’ wilderness experience teaches us that temptations toward disordered love are very personal and very subtle and third that such temptations are also relentless. The Tempter would sing with the Temptations: “I know you want to leave me, but I refuse to let you go.” The Gospel of Luke at the end of this story says “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time”. The Tempter will be personal and subtle and if you overcome the temptation in a given instance, there will be another opportune time.

Throughout his public ministry that followed his time in the wilderness, Jesus was tempted towards each of these very things again, remember the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish – IF you are the Son of God – he does in the end what the devil invited him to do but... this time it wasn’t a miracle to see how much God loved him, it was a miracle arising from how much Jesus loved the people around him. That is love ordered correctly. Then remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he was tempted towards his own safety and survival – “let this cup pass from me!” - chose to orient his love towards God despite the fact that it would lead to his own death – “not my will but yours”. And finally he stood before Pilate and Pilate asked Jesus if he was King. That must have been tempting to Jesus, right before he’s executed to remember the offer for him to Lord over all in the way of earthly kings. But Jesus remained silent. The temptations, the Tempter was right there with him to the bitter, bitter end, it’s just that Jesus’ trust in and love for God endured further.

So there you have it - we are in the penitential season of Lent and invited to notice the disordered love in our hearts and to re-orient them towards God, goodness, truth, life, love. But here's the thing. You can't muscle it there. You can't be perfectly ordered in your love, it's just the crazy truth about being human. It's the nature of our disordered loves that the very effort to muscle them into order will lock you into the disordered desire to control. Like the work to trying to be more humble which will make you proud that your being so humble so on and so forth.

So what do you do? Well, for one thing we join the people of AA in acknowledging that we are powerless over such things which ideally drives us towards a leaning into and a dependency upon our Higher Power, upon God to see us through, to reveal to us how our loves are disordered and to be granted the wisdom of re-ordering. And in the meantime remember how personal and subtle and relentless AND universal our disordered loves are, that we are all seeking love in however distorted our ways, and then be gentle on others who are flailing about along with you. We are incredibly complex and wounded creatures in so much need for love, each one of us. May we stand this Lent in the posture of receiving the truth about ourselves and the love about God so that then we can be conduits of God's love for the sake of others, in Jesus' name, amen.