

Sermon: Facing temptation

The form that these temptations from Satan to Jesus may surprise us, that takes place when Jesus fasts out in the wilderness.

The devil does not present a slice of chocolate cake, or offer piles of money. The devil is not working from a view of sin like that of our society. He doesn't concern himself with simply ill-gotten gain, or excessive, tasty calories.

What the devil does is to fly below the radar of conventional morality to present a series of temptations that can very effectively cripple all our relationships at their core: relationships with creation, God, and people.

These temptations are not concerned with simply loaves made from stones, jumping off a tall structure, and a chance for world domination. They are concerned with what for us seems closer to home, such matters as skill, trust, and power.

All of us have the opportunity to wreck our lives or allow our lives to become what they are meant to be: vehicles of grace.

Consider the first temptation, bread from stones, the one that has to do with skill.

Jesus has been fasting a very long time, and his hunger is severe. The devil, never one to miss a chance to get us, appears and challenges him to prove his identity and satisfy his hunger at the same time. He points to the stones visible everywhere in that desert. "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."

Jesus counters this proposal with words from Scripture. "It is written," he says, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."

This confrontation is about more than whether Jesus gets lunch that day. Jesus is asserting that identity—his identity as Son of God, our identity as children of God—does not depend on what we do, or what we have, but who we are, and who we listen to.

Jesus is God's Son and listens to God. We too are God's children, and we listen to God, we hear when God speaks to us.

Yes, we have skill, we have technique, but these must be secondary to the gracious purposes that God makes known to us. Just because we are capable of doing something does not mean that we should do it. Certain choices, though technically possible, contradict what God hopes for from all of us; and they are not consistent with our identity as God's children.

A couple of questions for us to consider.

- Do we look upon ourselves or others simply in terms of doing and having, or do we recognize ourselves and others for who we are: children of God?
- Do we view our skills and opportunities as simply ours to use how we see fit, or do we treat them as entrusted to us for use in accord with God's intention?

Now, let us consider the second temptation, jumping off a tall structure, the one that has to do with trust.

The devil takes Jesus into Jerusalem, to the very top of the temple. He invites Jesus to prove who he is, and to do so in a spectacular way. "If you are the Son of God, then jump down, Jesus," says the devil. "For remember what it says in the Bible: 'He will put his angels in charge of you.' and, 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you don't dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus counters this temptation, laced as it is with scripture quotes, with his own answer from the Bible: "Again, it is written, 'You shall not test the Lord, your God.'"

The devil knows the words of scripture, but is ignorant of its spirit. Yes, guardian angels are commissioned by God to help us here on earth. But to trust God does not mean the assumption that God will protect us regardless, even if we perform some life-threatening stunt to test the law of gravity.

Trusting God does not mean that God will enable our ridiculous behavior.

What it does mean is that we accept the life God offers us with its challenges, its risks, and its disappointments. It means living our lives and trusting God to make sense of them.

For Jesus this means that he comes to accept the cup of suffering God offers him in the Garden of Gethsemane, a cup he would readily refuse except that he trusts the one who offers it.

As children of God, it is not enough for us to simply trust God. We must trust God in the right way. We cannot expect God to endorse the products of our self-centredness as though the Holy One were a celestial enabler.

Not all risks are good ones. Some are ill-advised and destructive. Others are offered to lead us into the future God intends for us, a future marked by blessing.

A couple of more questions for us to consider.

- Do we trust God only about our own wants and plans, or do we trust even when God invites us to risk in a way that seems strange?
- Is some hardship in our life a cup offered to us by God or a leap we have taken off a tall structure?

We come now to the third temptation Jesus experiences out in the wilderness, a chance for world domination, the one that has to do with power.

This time the devil takes Jesus to a very high mountain that offers a panoramic view of all the countries of the world. Not only are the territories visible, but so too is their splendor.

No longer does the devil raise questions about the identity of Jesus, nor does he have scripture to misquote. He simply proposes a deal. Do you think that there is a note of impatience here?

“I will give you all of these things, if you will fall down and worship me.”

Jesus senses that he has gained the upper hand. “Get behind me, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and you shall serve him only.’”

For whatever reason, Jesus does not contest Satan’s claim of control over the countries of the world. What he attacks instead is the propriety of treating Satan as supreme. God alone, and only God is worthy of worship.

Just as he does not condemn all technique or all trust when addressing earlier temptations, so here Jesus does not condemn all power. What he insists on is that power, like trust, must be subservient to the purposes of God. Power sought and obtained for its own sake and power purchased at any price amounts to devil worship.

Power must be used instead in obedience to God, in service to the compassionate purposes of God.

Each one of us exercises some power in life. Some of us may appropriately seek a further sphere to exercise power, perhaps through our work or some form of community involvement. By exercising any form of power, we end up serving someone. The choice of whom we serve is a moral and spiritual matter of the greatest consequence.

Two more questions, then, for us to consider.

- Where are the places in our lives where we exercise power?
- Do we worship the Lord God alone through our use of power or do we worship something else?

Skill, trust, and power. These themes appear in the story of Jesus, not only during his wilderness temptation, but at other times as well.

Jesus refuses to turn stones into bread at the devil’s suggestion. On several occasions, however, he multiplies bread when many are hungry, and people give up their meal in to help others.

Jesus refuses to jump off the top of the temple, but he does accept that cup of suffering God offers him, and does so because he trusts God.

Jesus turns down the devil's bargain of gaining all the world in exchange for worship of someone less than God. What Jesus does is announce the kingdom of heaven come to earth, and then die and rise so we may enter that kingdom.

Jesus makes it possible for us to decide about skill, trust, and power in a way that acknowledges his triumph. We are free to find our identity through our participation in him as children of God, heirs of the kingdom by grace.

Jesus refused all of Satan's temptations, showing us that we must do the same. Amen.