

"Not by Bread Only"
Lent 1C--February 17, 2013
Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.
Text--Luke 4: 1-13

Temptation. Temptation. A juicy word--one that feels a bit naughty--and, therefore, somehow enticing. It can bring forth images of all kinds of luscious things--smooth and succulent chocolate truffles or hot fudge sundaes piled high with whipped cream if you're trying to lose weight or are diabetic or just attempting a healthy diet. A TV movie or page-turner novel if you're supposed to be finishing a report (or a sermon!). These things hurt you. There are also temptations that could hurt others if you give in to them. Cheating on a test or exaggerating on a resume to give you an unfair advantage, breaking a promise or being unfaithful to a loved one, taking money or goods that belong to someone else. Using power and prestige to make yourself look good and someone else bad. Twisting facts so that the blame for a mistake you made falls on another.

Of course, temptation isn't the real problem. What matters is what you do when you are tempted. It's whether you give into it or not. All of us are tempted from time to time. Even Jesus. And, each year, on the 1st Sunday of Lent, we hear the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Some translations from the Hebrew use the word "tested." That may be a better word.

Jesus went into the wilderness shortly after his baptism at the Jordan River. He was filled by the Holy Spirit. And we are told that it was the Holy Spirit that led him to the wilderness. This was liminal time for him--time to pray and to think. Time to talk with God before setting out in ministry.

It was a time of major vocational discernment, of clarifying who he was and what he was being called to do. The wilderness was harsh and difficult. There he was stripped of the comforts that he could call back on--companionship, water, food--he ate nothing for the forty days and slept under the sky, empty and totally dependent on God.

And, he was vulnerable -- or at least the Evil One thought he was. He approached Jesus when Jesus was famished, challenging him to use his power to change the stone to bread. He promised him power and authority over all the world. When neither of those things worked, he taunted him to test God by jumping off the pinnacle. And he couched all these tests in scripture.

These temptations--or tests--came, of course, with strings attached. Like Faust, Jesus would be selling his soul to the devil. In return, he would receive power to use as he wished. It could relieve Jesus' discomfort and promise him a pretty nice life. Or,

perhaps, he could use it for the greater good--turning stones to bread to relieve hunger. Establishing a just and peaceful reign. And yet, there were those strings!

What the Evil One apparently did not know was that Jesus already had been given greater gifts. You see, the wilderness, besides being a place of hardship was also a place of possibility where Jesus could be free of all distractions, wholly in relationship with God, prepared for greater things, free to bloom. Jesus went into the wilderness for a purpose, not as punishment or penance for some real or imagined sin. He went to a place where he could experience God at the very center of his life. He went there to receive something wonderful and to be filled. So when he faced the temptations--the offers of power, of shortcuts and immediate gratification--he could say "no" because he was aiming for something else. He knew who he was--and *whose* he was. Being in the wilderness wasn't so much about self denial as it was about being clear about what was really of value. And making space for it. Even welcoming it and looking forward to the wilderness experience!

In the tradition that turned these forty days before Easter into a time of penance and reflection that supposedly paralleled Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, self-denial, giving something up as penance or a test of will became the practice of the faithful. This emphasizes the sinfulness of human beings who need the periods of denial or punishment to "get right with God." Those of us who have a more positive view of humanity may reject this. We may just skip Lent altogether. But this ignores our human failings and bypasses an opportunity for spiritual growth and deepening.

Perhaps there is a middle way. A way in which we can willingly and intentionally put ourselves in a place where we are able to receive God's grace. We may change our usual patterns and schedules in order to do this, and it may mean missing TV shows or the extra time to work on taxes. But it is not about punishment or penance. It's about looking forward to something good and meaningful--an opportunity to gain self-knowledge or grow in relationship to God.

We need to remember, of course, the part about Jesus going into the wilderness to prepare himself. The prayer and discipline was not an end in itself for only his own spiritual good. It was to equip him to go back into the world to minister to others.

So maybe our Lenten disciplines should be about something other than punishment and deprivation. For after all, if we become sour and joyless or if "giving up" something is just a hollow act, what good is it? Maybe we need to look at our lives and find out what is in the clutter that gets in the way of keeping God in the center. And then to choose another way. A way that makes room for us to savor the fullness of life. Make no mistake. What I am suggesting is not easier than giving up chocolate for Lent. Or cigarettes or television or whatever your particular indulgence might be. It is, in fact, harder, because it is about reorienting our lives--making serious change.

It is about making room for God every single day, all of the time. It is about seriously and intentionally being in God's presence and listening for what God may be calling you to do and be. It is letting go of the petty annoyances that stand between you and others. It is seeing each and every person as a child of God. It is being kind and welcoming to all--and to ourself. It is knowing that there will always be times of temptation and loneliness. But, as was true for Jesus in the wilderness and in his ministry, you are not alone. For God is with you always, if you will just open yourself to be filled and lead by the Holy Spirit.

Amen.