

1 Lent Yr C, 17/02/2013
Lk 4:1-13
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"Jesus was tempted by the devil"

You may have heard of that famous theologian Ole Olafson. Perhaps you've also heard this rather humorous story about him that demonstrates his theological creativity and wit. Ole was the only Lutheran to move into a large Catholic neighbourhood. On the first Friday of Lent, Ole was outside grilling a big juicy steak on his grill. Meanwhile, all of his neighbours were eating cold tuna fish for supper. This went on each Friday of Lent.

On the last Friday of Lent, the neighbourhood men got together and decided that something had to be done about Ole. He was tempting them to eat meat each Friday of Lent, and they couldn't take it anymore. They decided to try and convert Ole to be a Catholic. They went over and talked to him and were so happy that he decided to join all of his neighbours and become a Catholic. They took him to church and the priest sprinkled some water over him and said, "You were born a Lutheran, you were raised a Lutheran, and now you are a Catholic."

The men were so relieved. Now their biggest Lenten temptation was resolved. The next year's Lenten season rolled around. The first Friday of Lent came, and just at supper time, when the neighbourhood was sitting down to their cold tuna fish dinner, came the wafting smell of steak cooking on the grill.

The neighbourhood men could not believe their noses! *What was going on?*

They called each other up and decided to meet over in Ole's yard to see if he had forgotten it was the first Friday of Lent. The group arrived just in time to see Ole standing over his grill with a small pitcher of water. He sprinkled some water over his steak on the grill, saying, "You were born a cow, you were raised a cow, and now you are a fish."

Although the story is humorous, I do think there is a rather profound theological point that it makes in relation to our gospel today. The story, I think, underscores how we human beings try to deceive ourselves and others when we fall into temptation or are tested. Ole by giving his beef steak a different name, by calling it fish, tries to deceitfully justify his behaviour and giving himself permission to do what the others in the community believed they were not permitted to do during Lent. In short, call something that is not permitted by a different name and then it becomes permissible.

I think this is one of the oldest games in the world, we all fall into it at one time or another, whether we realise it or not. It all got started back in the Garden of Eden when the devil, Satan, that deceitful creature, tricked Eve into eating the forbidden fruit by calling what God said was not permissible, permissible. On and on it went down through the ages, until Satan met up with his match in the wilderness with Jesus. He tries the same old method of naming that which was not permissible, permissible; of falsely tempting and testing Jesus in three ways. However this time the devil doesn't pull the wool over Jesus' eyes.

Yet notice when the devil tempts Jesus—he has been fasting, eating nothing for forty days while in the hot wilderness. A time and a place of vulnerability, of weakness. The devil knows when to attack. He attacks when Jesus and often when we are at our weakest and most vulnerable. The human Jesus was definitely famished after forty days. He could have easily used his divine powers to do as the devil tempted him to do by turning stones into bread and satisfying his physical hunger. However he refuses to do so. Why not immediately gratify one's physical needs? What's wrong with that?

Jesus, remembering the history of his people and their forty years of wilderness wandering, answers the devil by quoting a portion of Deuteronomy 8:3: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" What Jesus left out in that verse was Moses' explanation to his people that God was testing them in the wilderness those forty years as a preparation for them to settle into the Promised Land. Moreover, Moses added that 'one does not live by bread

alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.’ God’s word has the power to resist the devil’s temptations. Perhaps Martin Luther—who had his struggles with the devil—had this verse from Deuteronomy in mind when he wrote the following stanza of his famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God:” *Though hordes of devils fill the land all threatening to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us. Let this world’s tyrant rage; in battle we’ll engage! His might is doomed to fail; God’s judgment must prevail! One little word subdues him.*

God’s word filled with law and gospel, judgment and promise, forgiveness and new life, hope and love is far more powerful than all of the devil’s craft.

Jesus would eventually of course eat, and yes even provide bread for the hungry—however it is not bread alone, rather it is in the larger context of his public ministry, in serving the needs of others, in showing love and hospitality through sacred, community-oriented meals that point toward the inclusiveness of everyone in eating and drinking in the kingdom of God.

Turning to the second temptation, the devil appeals to the glory, power and authority that Jesus could enjoy over all the worldly kingdoms—all Jesus had to do was worship the old devil. Yes, the devil, the powers of evil are present in this world, all we need do is read the newspaper, listen to or watch the news to realise that harsh, cold reality. However, the devil lies when he says he has the power and authority to give Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world. Remember the last words of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel? There we learn that it is Jesus who makes the following claim: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” (Matt 28:18) So ultimately God, not the devil has authority over all worldly kingdoms.

Of course the lure of worldly power, authority and kingdoms has tempted many a military and political leader over the centuries—everyone from Genghis Khan to Alexander to Napoleon to Hitler, Stalin, to Amine and so on. However, we know where such despots under the power of evil lead humankind. They ultimately lead to corruption, tyranny, violence, and destruction.

Jesus therefore answers the devil again by remembering Moses' exhortation in Deuteronomy 6 to the Israelites as they get ready to enter the Promised Land. Moses reminds them not to fall into the trap that other gods can replace the LORD God. He tells them even though everyone around them worships and serves other gods, to do so would certainly be the downfall of the Israelites. The LORD alone was to be worshipped and served—he is the One who delivered Israel, provides for their every need, and is their Life-Giver. Rather than using worldly glory, power and authority to rule over others like a tyrant with the devil's blessing; Jesus knew that God's way was to serve others in sacrificial love; not the love of power, rather the power of love would nail him to a cross to gain all of his authority, power and glory by drawing all people to himself in this highest act of love.

In the third temptation to defy the law of gravity and jump off the Jerusalem temple's pinnacle, the devil even quotes scripture, a portion of Psalm 91, in a twisted, distorted way to falsely convince Jesus that it was okay to jump off such a place because no harm would come to him. Moreover, such a dare-devil act would wow and entertain folks. Jesus would make front page news—he'd be a real sensation; proving his power over the law of gravity. Jesus replies by quoting from Deuteronomy 6 again, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

The devil's ability to sugar coat every temptation; to make the temptation look so rich, easy and attractive reminds me of the following story told by former LAMP pastor-pilot, Les Stahlke several years ago:

Flying beneath a heavy winter overcast I could tell that the hills ahead of me were obscured in snowshowers. To continue straight ahead would be foolish and dangerous.

I had three choices: return to the native settlement where my flight began, land on a frozen lake below to wait for better weather, or divert to the west around the hills and snow.

Visibility was good below the low ceiling so I decided to stay in the air and head further west—around the hills and snow.

That's when I saw the phenomenon that has lured pilots to their death.

Looking over towards the hills I saw a bright spot. It appeared that the hills would be in sunshine after all. Why fly so far out of the way when after a little snow I would break into the clear?

Experience told me it was a trap. Rather than being better, it was likely to be fog right down to the trees. Everything appeared brighter because of the sun filling the fog with light.

Our daily decisions are not so different. Satan tries to lure us to our death. He makes the easy way look brighter and safer. The longer way around which requires wisdom, discipline and patience may seem wasteful to us.

Yet our training in God's word and the wisdom of our elders can help us to see Satan's traps for what they are—deadly promises. Life's flight may be long and difficult but Jesus has gone before us and made a way for us back to the glory of God.¹

During this Lenten season may we follow Jesus the long way, the difficult way, the way of the cross, from which is our true source of life and love. Amen.

1 Les Stahlke, "The Long Way Around," in: Lorraine Kalis, editor, *1991 LAMP Lenten Devotions*, p. 42.