

“ANYTHING BUT TEMPTATION”

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

A little boy is in a grocery store, standing near an open box of cookies.

“Now then, my lad,” said the grocer as he approached the boy, “what are you up to?”

“Nothing,” replied the boy.

“Nothing? ... it looks to me as if you were trying to take a cookie.”

“You’re wrong, sir. I’m trying *not* to take a cookie.”

Oscar Wilde once wrote a line for one of his characters who said, “I can resist anything but temptation.”¹ I’m afraid that’s true for many of us. That’s what today’s gospel text is all about: temptation. Every human being is familiar with it. We’re tempted by food we shouldn’t eat; we’re tempted by products we shouldn’t buy; we’re tempted by desires that should never enter our heads. In a lot of cases we’re saved from our temptations simply because they are beyond our practical reach. But what if they weren’t? It’s somewhat frightening to imagine what we might do if we actually had the power and the means to yield to our wildest temptations and desires.

Michael Crichton’s book, *Sphere*, is based on that premise. Maybe you saw the film some years ago. A sphere is discovered which has come from an alien civilization, and those who enter it have the power to make their every wish come true. Sound like a pretty good thing? Think again. There is the good side, of course. But, if our every dream could come true, then we would be empowered to embrace and live out every temptation and fall prey to every fear that confronts us.

Luke’s account today is a remarkably detailed tour of the temptations dangled before Jesus by an articulate, scripture-quoting Devil. And what makes these temptations so potent is that Jesus *does* have the power to make any or all of them come true.

Stones Into Bread

The first thing the Devil suggested to Jesus was that he should make the physical and material well-being of himself and others the focus of his ministry. Now, whatever else you might understand by Luke’s reference to “The Devil,” I think we can agree that it is, for Jesus, the *voice of temptation*. This story is not about good versus evil. As we shall see, it is more about the temptation to settle for “pretty good” instead of “excellent.”

Jesus was acutely aware, after more than a month in that rocky, barren wilderness, of his own hunger and the hunger and poverty of so many people in Palestine. The stones that were scattered everywhere on the ground had begun to look like round loaves of bread. And he was so hungry. Why not eat?

Part of our problem with the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is the difficulty of seeing his temptations as anything that was really bad.

¹ Lord Darlington, in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, act 1

The things the Tempter offered to do for Jesus don't seem so awful when we first look at them. If this voice were really evil, why didn't it invite Jesus to slaughter the Romans, or partake in some barbaric, cultic act? Why didn't it suggest sinful, evil things that we could really sink our teeth into? Like the violence and cruelty and horror we see so frequently in movies—and nearly every day on the eleven o'clock news? *That* is evil we can understand! But turning a rock into a piece of bread when you are hungry? What's so terribly wrong about that? Didn't Moses get water from a rock when his people were in need? We're only human, we need to eat. If you could make bread out of a rock, why not do it?

But you see, what is really going on in this first temptation is that Jesus is tempted to use his power to meet purely personal material needs.

One commentator, Steven L. McKinley, re-wrote the biblical account into modern terms. The devil, when he spoke to Jesus, said, "If you are the Son of God, take this lottery ticket and make it into a winner. The jackpot is \$250 million this week. Look at all the good you could do with that much money. Think of all the cash you could give to fight world hunger. Think of the homeless shelters, the safe houses for battered women, the drug abuse programs you could fund with that money. I bet you could even save a few churches from extinction with a little piece of your millions."

"Satan," Jesus answered in McKinley's story, "you don't get it. Sure I could feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and even pay for a whole bunch of church buildings. Everyone would be grateful to me. But that wouldn't change them one little bit, would it? Would that make people feel closer to the One who created them? No. Give them what they want and they will only want more. The hunger for "things" can never be satisfied." (End quote.)

"Turn the stones into bread," the voice of temptation said. "Feed yourself. Feed others. Meet those physical and material needs of people, which are so obvious. What could be more important than that?"

How vulnerable we all are to the Tempter's suggestion that there is nothing so important or desirable as physical and material well-being! But there is more to life than that. And Jesus was not fooled.

Unlimited Power

The second temptation, like the first, doesn't seem like such a bad idea on the surface. Jesus is shown the kingdoms of the world. The temptation is that all those kingdoms would be given to him. We have to wonder. Why not do it? What could have been better for the world—then or now—than for Jesus to take the reigns of world government? Not such a very awful thing. But there was a little more here. The Tempter says, "You can rule the whole world *if you will just promise to do what I say.*"

It must have been very tempting. Power is the only thing more tempting to human beings than bread, money, and material wealth. To be on top! To be in control! To have the respect of others who seek to do our bidding. How we dream of such things! How we envy those who have this kind of power!

And the Tempter's sales pitch was pretty logical. "All you have to do is remember who is in control of things, and play ball accordingly. Who really succeeds in running things in the world, anyway," the Tempter says, —"those who play by God's rules, or those who play by mine?"²

² J. Harold McKeithen

The trouble is, in any hands but God's hands, power corrupts. Jesus knew that. And he knew something more. He knew that what the Tempter wanted was something that belongs to God alone—worship. Jesus refutes temptation simply by quoting Scripture: “It is written,” Jesus says, “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” And he didn't give in.

Put God to the Test

But it wasn't over. Jesus had resisted the temptation to make physical and material needs his only concern, and he had resisted the temptation to use power the way it is used in the world.

Here the Tempter changes tactics. It's as if he said, “Okay, you have beaten me. You have decided you will serve God only. But maybe you had better find out whether God is really going to honor your commitment. Maybe you had better check out whether he is going to stand by you or not. Test it out. Jump off a high place and see if he catches you like the Old Testament says he will.”

Test God, in other words. Don't have faith unless it's a sure thing.

Who wouldn't run into a burning building to save a child, if we knew for a fact that we would come out unharmed? Who would have a problem with tithing if we could be sure God would provide the means for us to buy everything else that we might want?

And most of us would probably gladly give money to beggars, if we had an ironclad guarantee that they really were in need, couldn't work, and were not going to use the money for drugs or alcohol. Test God—don't have faith unless it's a sure thing.

The third temptation was to make our commitment to God's way conditional upon proof that God will make our life all work out without any undue pain or difficulty. And that is no kind of faith at all.

Jesus was tempted to turn from compassion to self-pity and eat the bread; from commitment to compromise and rule the world; from faith and trust in God to doubt and testing that love.³

In short, Jesus was tempted with the most insidious of temptations—the temptation to do what *appears* to be attractive and good. But the means of achieving the good would have been through a shortcut that bypassed the excellent, that bypassed God's purpose for Jesus and his ministry.

How often it is true that we are tempted most at our points of greatest strength—in Jesus' case, his compassion, his commitment, and his faith. What are our strong points? How might we be tempted to settle for our own “good” ways instead of God's excellent way?

As we enter the season of Lent, we remember, among other things, that we would be wise not to take the evil of the world too lightly. And so we pray, as Jesus instructed us to pray, “*Lead us not into temptation...for yours—not ours—is the Kingdom, O God.*”

Grace, mercy and peace. Amen.

Dr. Stephen C. Brewer

³ Robert J. Elder