

THE TEMPTER'S GIFT

Texts on Sunday, March 13, 2011

Lent One

Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7; Matthew 4: 1-11

A word about the cataclysms in Japan. So far as it is a question of help, God help us to help with swift, effective generosity. But so far as it is a question of the meaning of these calamities, may our thoughts be humble and our tongues dumb. The gift of science to study causes and effects has been with us long enough to wean us from forlorn belief in a god willing and able to harm his foes and help his friends in earthquake, wind, and fire. My faith in God harbors no sense whatever that God works in the accidents of nature as cause or limit. My faith rather intimates that it is a divine gift that all creation operates only according to its laws; and that the gifts of faith, hope, and love coming down in the human creature alone actually contact the divine presence when we call upon the Name now, to ask for more faith, more hope, more love; and that our theories about divine power in the mechanism of nature are temptations to deny our own nature, and to see beyond the veil of time. Having said that, let us turn to the ancient wisdom in the story of the temptation of our Lord, who refused to overleap the limits of a human life, but took them to the cross.

When is temptation temptation? It has a curious character. Is it when someone plans to sway you to do a thing which would turn you from your path? This is the cartoon we continually conjure about temptation—an evil spirit clad all in red, intending harm. But this is foolishness, or worse. A person sure where his happiness lies is not tempted by persuasions. To the faithful partner, a would-be seducer seems silly, not seductive. So temptation cannot be when another aims to try his will on mine. Temptation is a tango.

Is it when we fall from our path, when we know that what we are about to do is not right, but we do it anyway? That is another cartoon diversion from seriousness. You hear chocolate or a drink called “temptations,” and then a giggle over the planned pleasure. These are not temptations. It is stupid to give up for Lent something that is actually bad for you. Why, it may be sin to do so. The bible’s *Letter of James* says so: “Anyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.” (James 4:17) However that may be, falling into the pit of bad action is not temptation. We’ve gone too far.

Is temptation when you become aware of your attraction to a possible course of action, but feel unsure whether the bad effects outweigh the good? This gets us closer—but every decision of any moment has such a character. Mow lawn now, or later? Send daughter to public school, or private? Give up driver’s license as grown son has asked, or keep driving? Indecision does

not always involve temptation. There is still another element.

We see that other element with Jesus in the desert with the devil. If we suppose that Jesus declines the devil's offers like a horsetail flicking flies away, then he is not in fact tempted, but only annoyed. Temptation implies danger. Something is at stake. What is at stake here? Knowing the end of the Jesus story, we may incline to say that salvation is at stake for all who claim Jesus as Lord. But if that were *Jesus'* answer—if he knows how the story ends—then this is a Hollywood script; bring up the violins. There is no danger, no temptation if his sufferings are of dentist-chair character, putting up with pains for an hour or two in view of a soon ease. Such is not the gospel.

The element in temptation that adds danger to mere ignorance-of-the future, and puts something at stake, is the awareness in the tempted one that the decision which must be taken now will affect his destiny. In this, Jesus' temptation, and mine, and yours are all of one kind. We see a possible course of action side by side with another, certain only that a decision must be taken soon—and at some level we know that the unfolding of our own identity will follow with the decision. At some level, we know that we are responsible to our God for what we shall become.

Temptation's negativity lies in our two-ness, when we are a divided house of desires. Temptation is not the poetry of possibility; it is not two roads diverged in a yellow wood and how sorry we are we could not travel both. Temptation is *I want this* and *I want that*—confused with doubt as to which truly belongs to me. *Doubt* and *double* are word-cousins! You see it in *doubt's* funny spelling. You feel it in the anxiety of double-mindedness, doubting that you can find well-being down either path if you don't go both. You feel split! The negativity in temptation is not in the thing desired, nor in its enjoyment, much less in the forces which bring the possibilities to our awareness. The negativity is in our doubt that we can be happy without the objects of our desire. The pain of temptation signifies how fiercely we crave a resolution of our doubt in integrity and identity, in cooperation with our destiny. But while we still despair of peace, sin has opportunity in us.

In Romans 14, the apostle Paul writes, "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." This is the only definition of sin in all the Bible which shows sin's inward character more than its outward breach of law. When you reflect on your own sins, on the actual accounts of things you have done and left undone, things laid up in your memory with remorse, see these two things. One, that in hopelessness that your own good could come to you in any other way, you did what you did. Hopelessness, or despair, is the opposite of faith and trust. It is the ground of every kind of human harm. See that. Then, two, see that at length, you understood that your happiness did not in

fact depend on that action you took; that the sin brought sorrows unnecessary on others or on you. If we follow Paul in this, the label “sin” belongs only to those acts where (1) despairing of our own happiness, we have taken what was not given, or have not given what another needed to take *and*—this is critical—(2) where we have been enabled to look back and see, as if with the eye of God, that we have sinned. Such a strange and powerful word ! which both names our evil and connects us with the power that corrects our vision and renews us for right relationships. Do not let this precious word go: “I have sinned.”

But let us return to the moment of temptation, before the sin was chosen, for if there is a spiritual gift in the power to see what we have done with one eye, an eye not divided between self-defense and self-condemnation, but sure of sin and ready for regeneration; then there is another spiritual gift of power in temptation’s hour, before despair has overcome us.

When we say of Jesus that he never sinned, let us not bother to mean something small by it, such as that he never talked back to his mother, or never needed to say he was sorry to a friend. Let us mean rather that he never despaired of his destiny. To have a destiny does not mean that you suppose you perceive its particulars—only pride imagines particulars. To have a destiny means that you trust that your life belongs within a frame of meaning infinitely beyond your compass, and that you are encompassed, and that your present decision will affect how life unfolds within that great frame.

You could say that in the desert with the devil, Jesus discovers his destiny; and that the danger to him, as to any person tempted, is that he will *not* find out who he is, should he merge his life into the lanes where all men and women always try to drive (though not always to evil ends): desiring to hunger no more, to be sure of God’s care, to rule in wisdom and splendor. You could say that only if Jesus’ destiny is really at stake does it make sense to say with the gospels, that “Jesus was led up into the wilderness *by the Spirit of God* to be tempted by the devil.” And then we must look and see, What did he do, to discover his destiny in the desert?

He said No: I accept hunger, come what may. He said No: I accept uncertainties, even to death. He said No: if God give me rule over myself and over no other, God alone is all my wisdom and splendor. You feel this. Have you not known the deep, all but hidden truth of these negations?—that in the instant of perceiving that nothing can remove you from your happiness—neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation—in that moment in which you are moving not at all, but are still and quiet within, your heart is not puffed up and your eyes searching not too

high, and you are not wandered off in things too great or wonderful for you; no, but like a weaned child in its mother's arm is your soul within; *then*, in that moment, temptation falls away and your integrity is like a sound boat on deep waters and you are in God's compass, come what may. This is the gift of the Spirit in the wilderness. You discover who you are.

Now, terrible evils and crimes are unfolding across the city and the nation and world; always, and everywhere. Some are interpersonal, some impersonal, some international, and we are implicated in them, more than we like to admit. In the next sermons of Lent, we will look deep at sins in which we are bound together, as a church, as a city, as a nation. We will consider the peculiar new form of sin called Wisconsin. We will look hard at the desire of wealth and power to seize more and more, with no consciousness of sin, and heedless of the *anawim*—the humble of the earth. However hard we look, and whatever you come to see, may you always know your freedom to return to the moment of power with God in the hour of temptation, when, bare of all accomplishment or wealth or good regard, you know that God's eye is in you to see and to choose, and that like your Lord, you can choose to embrace your destiny, come what may.

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