

“Walking the Rough Road”

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Scripture:

Luke 4:1-13 (NRSV)

1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone.' " 5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' " 9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11 and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' " 12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The Sermon:

This story is first about Jesus. His identity, his humanity, his vocation. His temptations, which acutely mirror the experience of his people. And then, it is about us.

These stories of temptation can be found in the gospel of Luke, the gospel of Mark and the gospel of Matthew. There is nothing like this in the gospel of John. In John, the challenges of temptation are right there in the midst of his ministry experience. But in Luke, this story is a harbinger of what is to come.

In this story, we learn that Jesus is alone for forty days, echoing the 40 years of the desert sojourn of the Hebrews who were freed from slavery under Pharaoh.

- And Jesus is challenged to make himself a loaf of bread, using the same language and wording to remind him of the food that came to those slaves, by the power of God's attention, as manna every day.
- Then Jesus is tempted with power, as his people were tempted with kings and kingdoms, as they were often tempted by the desire to be a powerful nation among the nations of the Mideast, to manipulate and strategize armies and treaties to be an empire.
- Lastly Jesus is tempted to press God to fulfill God's promises. The psalmist, that we quoted this morning in our call to worship, is quoted by Satan, Jesus' enemy.

And Jesus, in responding to all these temptations, gives us the words of a faithful Jew. He quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, and not randomly either; he quotes Deuteronomy in the same chapter where the Shema, the great prayer of Israel, is found.

"Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

You don't have to look hard to see that the three temptations of Satan toward Jesus are indeed related to these qualities of love of God: to make bread and satisfy his human hunger at the expense of his love of God; to compromise his soul (his "life" in another translation) for the world's power; to make demands of God rather than focus in his trust of God with all his might.

Yes, in the gospel of Luke, Jesus is modeling the hopes and the prayers of the Jewish people. He is repeatedly shown as the model of faith in God.

What do Jesus' temptations show you? How can this ancient mysterious tale speak to you and to me in this moment?

The story can only speak if we realize that Jesus as fully human, and as son of God, filled with the Spirit, ***is like us, and does not ask of us, anything that he will not do himself.***

He will go out into the barren places, suffer extreme loneliness, struggle with every sort of hunger... ***hunger for love and relationship, hunger for power to make a place in the world and do what he wants in the world, hunger for certainty and an end to wrenching questions.***... Jesus will do this, and shows us that we can do this, too. We are not asked to do the impossible, though it may be extremely hard.

I can barely make a three-day solo silent retreat! I don't know quite how Jesus did it; to be alone, and to go inside and experience so much of what we run from, by being busy, by being with friends, tuned in to media, turned off to our inner lives, fears, tensions. Yet, he did go away and he did face his fears, his tensions, his pain and doubt.

We often say in our time: "that person has to face their own personal demons" and the demons can be of every kind!

But no one faces their demons without silence, and without honesty; you have to stop running away first.

So Jesus goes to the wilderness, away from every distraction...and they follow him!

Our hungers! How they can clamor within us: I need food, but I also need stroking for my ego. I need food but, I also need someone to tell me I am pretty or smart or worthy of love. We need food, but we also hunger for alcohol, sugar, assurance, sex, money, fame. We hunger for the love of our children, or the esteem of our boss. We can become fierce and distorted in satisfying our hungers. Weird and sick, if we don't face our demons.

And I, I hunger for power sometimes...I hunger for the power to "make things right" as I believe they should be right! In the brutal honesty of silence, I have to ask myself what I would do to get *my way* in the world...would I condone voter fraud if it got me what I want in the legislature?

Would I accept the power to silence my enemies by slander, to move my agenda forward? What do I do to stifle others and get what I want?

Do I get what I want through creation of guilt in others, through fear mongering, through emotional manipulation?

All these are temptations.

Jesus faced them, we face them too.

Lastly, I understand that **final challenge of the devil**, especially in this day and age. I see the temptation he flings at Jesus all around me: **it is the temptation to have the final word in an argument about what is really real!**

It is the desire to "prove" who God is, what God desires, what God intends.

I know what God wants. God is on my side.

I can prove it.

I will fling scripture at you like a weapon and I will win!

Or: I will fling science at you, and show you how stupid you are!

Or: I will fling my belief system at you to show you are less than human and I am more than mere human!

I will be racist, I will be anti-immigrant, I will be GLBTQ phobic because I KNOW what God wants. And it is not you.

This is testing God. This is the presumption of challenging and controlling the wholly Mysterious God of all Creation with the small and sick dominations of our egos and our fears. There is a lot of this happening in our society right now and we must do our very best, to not give in to this temptation to pretend we know the will of God, the limit of the compassion of God, the mercy of God. We must only choose God, and seek God.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”.

Listen: you and I may never experience the temptation of the abuse of great power, or the challenge of being a hugely popular social figure surrounded by sycophants and toadies. We may never be power brokers over the lives of hundreds or millions.

But Lent has begun and it asks us to look within and be honest about our temptations. Go to our own silent place and face up to ourselves and to our divided hearts, our misplaced priorities. And realign ourselves with the Shema: to love God with all of our heart, soul and strength.

And in the midst of this, we are encouraged to look to Jesus: Jesus is walking the road of truth, humility, integrity, faithfulness, love.

It is a rough road, in his time and in our time.

We try to walk this road and follow Jesus every day, and it is not easy, and the path is not clear. The temptations are there for us too.

But Jesus never put before us, something he himself would not do.

So be strong, be brave.

Where he has gone, we can follow.

Amen.