

Lead Us Not Into Temptation **by The Rev. Dr. Randall Bush, Pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church**

Luke 4:1-13

*Presented at East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA
February 25, 2007*

In Dag Hammarskjöld's classic book, Markings, he offered this warning: "You cannot play with the animal in you without becoming wholly animal, [or] play with falsehood without forfeiting your right to truth, [or] play with cruelty without losing your sensitivity of mind. [Those] who wish to keep [their] gardens tidy do not reserve a plot for weeds."¹ We are always tempted to play with the animal within (I did it during a moment of weakness), to play with falsehood (I only told a little white lie), or to play with cruelty (He had it coming to him). But if we wish to keep our spiritual gardens tidy, there is never a reason to reserve a plot for weeds.

The gospel lesson describes a time when Jesus was sorely tempted by the Tempter. Most sermons on this passage are built around the three temptations dangled before Christ in the hope that he would stumble just as he was beginning his earthly ministry. We stumble in our lives, quite often actually, so there is much that can be said about how important it is to resist temptation along our spiritual journeys. But we should also note that we do not travel on our spiritual journeys alone. Who we are walking with, who keeps us company on the road of faith can make all the difference in the world.

I recently heard a radio report about an online support group for people who were having financial troubles. They would share information about their budgets and then regularly check in with each other, celebrating when they stayed within their budget or confessing when they overspent that month. Having to be accountable to someone else, whether about our spending habits, or our dieting goals, or staying sober or off drugs, is a key factor in whether we are successful or not. It is at the heart of the 12 Step programs; it is also a big part of being a mutually supportive, mutually accountable church family.

Who is walking beside you on the journey of faith often determines whether you stay on the right road or fall into the ditch. That was a central theme in John Bunyan's famous work, The Pilgrim's Progress. Christian, the pilgrim traveling from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, made good progress when accompanied by Faithful and Hopeful, but was misled when guided by false companions like Ignorance and Mr. Worldly Wiseman. If you're not so sure your teenagers will appreciate Bunyan's parable, then point them to the similar lesson found in Tolkein's Lord of the Rings. Discuss with them the difference between Frodo's progress when his primary guide was the loyal Sam Gamgee, as opposed to what happens when the distorted Gollum was in the lead.

How well you resist temptation is greatly affected by who you are with. I have a confession to make about a high school Halloween prank long ago. A group of

classmates decided we should go out soaping car windows. I'd never done that before, but I tagged along and I must confess I wasn't very good at it. While the others were smearing the windows with Lifebuoy, I was usually writing in soap, "Sorry." On the other hand, having two young children has been a constant motivation for me to be better than I might normally be. Around them I am much more conscious of my reactions to other drivers, to my choice of language when I'm upset, and how I treat others in general. They make me better than I might otherwise be just by their presence in my life.

At a Chautauqua program, someone saw a t-shirt that contained this prayer: Please God, don't let me be in line behind Mother Teresa on Judgment Day. Sure, who'd want to follow Mother Teresa up to the Pearly Gates? But then again, think about walking up to those same gates beside Mother Teresa. Who you are with can make all the difference in the world.

In our modern, individualistic culture, we hear the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and we apply it to ourselves in individualistic terms. We picture the devil whispering in our ears and wonder whether we'd succumb to the Tempter or withstand his temptations. The danger in this approach is that it removes everyone else from the equation: if we succeed, great; if we fail, well, it was only a little white lie; it was only a brief moment of physical weakness; or that guy had it coming to him anyway. The truth is: We try to treat temptations as first-person singular events, but they are always first-person plural events.

So as the story goes, on a hot, wilderness day long ago, the devil sidled up to Jesus in his moment of physical hunger and whispered with a voice of feigned concern, "You must be starving. Turn a stone into a loaf of bread." To which Jesus replied, "One does not live by bread alone." Our need for food is never just our need for food. Others are always involved in the equation and every act of feeding yourself must be done conscious of those around you with the same physical needs. Even the act of eating is an expression of faith and stewardship and spiritual focus.

As the story goes, the devil took Jesus up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. Preacher Fred Craddock makes the point that the devil altered time itself to show Jesus all the wealth and power and glory of this world in a mere instant.² Shouldn't the one who can manipulate space and time be worthy of our worship? Isn't this something that we should feel awed by and bow down before in wonder? Again, others are involved in this temptation. Those kingdoms parading by in the Tempter's vision are real people and places, nations and kingdoms and families and lives all existing under the dominion and care of a loving God. Remove God from the equation and yes, the parade of history entirely focused on us becomes incredibly awe-inspiring and tempting. But recognize God as the true Lord of time and history and no special effects sideshow will be able to turn our heads and drop us to our knees before anyone or anything else. Hence Jesus' answer, "Worship the Lord your God and serve no other."

As the story goes, the devil appeared a third time, taking Jesus to the highest tower of the Jerusalem temple. Below was the temple courtyard full of people, wandering pilgrims, lost sheep in need of a shepherd. The Tempter tells Jesus to jump, knowing that God's angels would protect him, bearing him up so that no harm would come to him. But more importantly, all those who witnessed this miracle would worship him. Surely that was the point of the incarnation – to reveal God's nature and love in the long-awaited Messiah so that through him, our relationship with God and one another might be healed at last.

In the devil's final desperate temptation, he no longer looks at things from Jesus' perspective. He turns the focus onto everyone else. He points down from the temple heights and basically asks Jesus whether he cares at all for the mass of humanity below him. If so, then jump down; deny your humanity and oneness with them so that you might demonstrate your divine nature and thereby win their allegiance literally in one fell swoop. Do it for them. The angels will guard you. The people will worship you. Go ahead and jump.

In T.S. Eliot's play, Murder in the Cathedral, when Thomas á Becket was tempted before being killed at the church altar, he uttered the famous lines, "This last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason." Christ's love for us did not lead him to do the right deed for the wrong reason. He turned to the Tempter and said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." And the devil vanished – not for good; in fact, only for a while. In time, Jesus' physical needs would again cry out for relief, and though he would say, "I thirst," he did not use his power to quench that thirst. In time he would see kingdoms parade before him while high on Calvary, but they would only shout jeers at this crucified King of the Jews. In time he would be positioned over the people's heads, but they would look up this time and cry out, "Let him come down if he is the Son of God." Once more the temptations never involved only one person, but touched all our lives. And once more, Jesus withstood the Tempter and all of us are beneficiaries of his resolve.

Who you are is greatly shaped by who you are with. Traveling companions on the journey of faith are some of the best resources we have to withstand temptation along the way and to reach our heavenly home at last. Let me close with a wonderful story from Anne Lamott's book, Traveling Mercies. An African American Presbyterian preacher named Veronica told how, when she was about seven years old, her best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She became very frightened. A policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman and then told him firmly, "You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here."³ No temptation comes to you alone, nor need it be resisted solely by your own strength and willpower. By God's grace and as part of a community of faith, remember who you walk with on your journey of faith and you'll always find your way home.

AMEN

Copyright 2007 – The Rev. Dr. Randall K. Bush

¹ Dag Hammarskjöld, Markings, p. 15.

² Fred Craddock, Interpretation Bible Commentary: Luke, 1990, p. 55.

³ Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies, 1999, p. 55.