

Could It Have Been Different?

Luke 4:1-13

February 25, 2007

I.

Today's Gospel describes how Jesus was tempted as he wandered in the desert for forty days. Some biblical scholars and theologians draw a parallel between this story and the story of the Hebrew people who wandered in the desert for forty years before entering the promised land. Aren't we glad the length of our Lenten season is based on Jesus rather than the Hebrews?

This is a frequently preached passage in the Bible. It's the classic story of the confrontation between good and evil. It's the classic story of how Jesus, in the desert of Judea, did what Adam did not do in the Garden of Eden. And it shows how the devil can tempt us with things that seem good on the surface, but actually are destructive and harmful in our lives.

As a result, this story of the temptation sometimes is used as the model for humanity. The reasoning goes like this. Jesus resisted the devil's temptation and was obedient to God's will. Therefore, we also should resist temptation and be obedient. Very Simple. End of Story. Right?

II.

Well, it's more complicated than that. There is more to it. Let's begin by asking if there is anything about this dramatic confrontation between Jesus and Satan that seems unique. Is there something about this story that distinguishes it from our own lives?

One big difference comes to mind. We are not sons of God or daughters of God in the way Jesus was. We were not blessed at our baptisms with a booming voice from heaven that claimed to be well pleased with us. We do not have supernatural powers and cannot perform miracles.

In my early years this affected my understanding of Jesus. I knew he was special, but it also seemed that he had a big advantage I did not have. Although I believed that Jesus died for my sins, I also used to think that he was in a no-lose position. I thought that he was walking around with an ace in his back pocket, so to speak.

I believed Jesus always knew he was the Son of God, and he always knew he eventually was going to go to heaven and sit at God's right hand no matter what. Therefore, I thought he also knew that whatever temptations and difficulties he experienced here, including the crucifixion, were just temporary burdens. He could be confident that God would make everything right.

So, because I thought Jesus already understood that it all was destined to work out well for him in the end, it seemed he was not under the same pressures as the rest of us. He could not fail. He knew he would die, but he also knew he would be resurrected.

I suppose I believed that God had worked it out so that the fix was in, and the devil never even had a chance with Jesus. As a result, I concluded that just because Jesus resisted temptation did not mean that I could be the same way. I didn't have his advantages.

Well, that's what I thought in the beginning. I thought that the life and death of Jesus unfolded according to a script. Our lives on earth, however, seemed unscripted.

III.

As I pondered these questions I became more involved in the church. I went to Bible study groups and had the benefit of good preaching and teaching. I began to see parallels instead of differences, and my thinking shifted.

I started to think that, of course, Jesus had an ace in his back pocket. God put it there for him. And I came to believe that we all are in the same position. All of us as Christians are carrying that same ace because God, through Jesus, also put it there for us.

And then I thought, of course Jesus knew that he eventually was going to heaven no matter what. Don't we believe the same about ourselves? Don't we know that as believers who have accepted Jesus Christ as our savior, we will be inheritors of that Christian promise of eternal life in the presence of our Lord?

In the same way, I no longer saw a problem with the idea that Jesus knew beforehand that the temptations and difficulties he was to experience on earth were just temporary burdens to endure. Don't we know the same thing about ourselves? Don't we believe that the temporary trials and tribulations of this world will give way to the eternal joy and glory of the next?

Indeed, I concluded, the fix was in for Jesus, just as the fix is in for us now. Jesus' knowledge about his own destiny on earth and in heaven was much like what we know and believe about our own destinies as Christians.

As a result, I no longer saw Jesus as a mystical figure whose work on earth was difficult to apply to my life. I began to see how he could be a model for all of us.

IV.

But questions arose again. As I learned more about theology and faith I began to think about the meaning of free will. And as I considered the story of the temptation of Jesus against the background of the free will that we, as humans have, I began to wonder if the temptation had to have turned out the way it did. Could it have been different?

This led me to speculate on whether Jesus could have taken Satan up on one of his offers. I began to think that perhaps the fix was not in, perhaps Jesus did not have an ace in his back pocket, and possibly he could have made different choices when he was tempted.

I perceived such a possibility based on Jesus' nature. He was both fully human and fully divine. Both natures existed simultaneously within him. While it remains a mystery as to how that all worked, his human nature was evident with his birth in the manger, and his divine nature was imparted from heaven, and they were united but distinct within him.

And, so I wondered if because of his human nature, Jesus could have chosen otherwise when tempted by the devil. His human aspect presumably had free will just as we have free will, and so in theory the whole story might have had a different ending. We don't think, do we, that Jesus merely was quoting from Deuteronomy as actors read their lines? He consciously had to choose those Scriptures, didn't he?

Some people say that if Jesus had called upon heavenly powers to resist earthly temptation, then his humanity would have been different from ours, and his death on the cross would not have the meaning we believe it does. According to this reasoning, Jesus would have had to resist Satan within his humanity only. Otherwise, his passion simply wouldn't have counted in the same way. Others, however, say he was the revelation of God, and God cannot sin.

Well, to sum this all up, the question is whether Jesus was able through the force of his own will to resist temptation in his humanity, or whether by his very nature of also being fully divine he was unable to give in to temptation.

I believe the latter must be true. Even though Jesus, as fully human, had free will as we do, his humanity did not exist entirely separate from the influence of his divinity. The details of

that remain a mystery, but we cannot disregard his divine nature and we cannot diminish his sacrifice because of it.

V.

So, how can we understand this temptation story in our lives today? It calls us to think about the choices we make. And this might raise some questions. For example, we believe that we have free will to make our own decisions. But we also are told that God has a plan for us. And if God always is in control, what does our free will actually mean anyway?

Since I speculated earlier in this sermon, let me do it again. We do believe that God has plans for us, but it may well be that he has more than one plan, or alternate plans. He might have a Plan A for us, and a Plan B. There might even be a Plan C, and any number of other plans, all of which he initially creates but ultimately are dependent on the choices we make.

And of course, Plan A, for example, may be what God truly wants for us. It might reflect his hopes for us. But because we have free will, it could be possible that we can make choices that invoke Plan B, or some other plan, and cause one of them to become reality instead. It still would be God's plan, but it would be the product of our choice. And God could grieve for that, because he had set it up to be different if we had only chosen his way.

And who are we to say that God does not have the power to work in that way? Who are we to say that God has one and only one plan for our lives, and that our free will is not free at all because the choices we make are already embedded in that one and only plan?

So, if you accept this idea, then the difference as to which of God's plans becomes reality for us is based on our choices. It's based on how we exercise our own free will. Yes, they all are God's plans, and one of them may be the plan he really wants for us. But what we actually get, whether it's Plan A or Plan B, or Plan C, or whatever, is up to us and what we do.

VI.

And we know that at times we give in to temptations. The devil can find our weaknesses. He doesn't tempt us with unpleasant things, just as he didn't tempt Jesus with unpleasant things.

Look at the reading. Satan wanted Jesus to use his power to turn stones into bread. Bread is a good thing. Jesus was hungry. We all use bread for nourishment.

And Satan offered Jesus the chance to rule world right then, without even having to go to the cross. The reading makes it clear that Satan would have given all worldly authority to Jesus. Yes, Jesus would have been obligated to bow down to Satan in spiritual realms, but he also would have been able to set the world right. Satan would have removed himself from worldly affairs, and Jesus could have cured the world's ills. We, of course, would not have salvation.

And what about throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple to be rescued by angels? That would have saved time and effort. Everyone would have known who Jesus was right from the start, and he could have avoided a lot of opposition by people who doubted him.

At first glance these temptations had elements of attractiveness to them. None would have been immoral or in violation of Jewish law. But underneath, they were designed to draw Jesus away from obedience to God's will.

So, we always are called to remember that Satan wraps these temptations in pretty packages with plausible explanations. And they are directed to the things that matter most in our jobs, families, marriages, and our lives. They contain elements of truth wrapped in attractive lies, and they are designed to separate us from God.

VII.

So, what do we do? Go back to the reading. Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. We have the same Spirit within us to guide and strengthen us, and help us overcome temptation.

We should not think we can contend with Satan directly. There is no need for us to face him down as Jesus did in the desert. We are not strong enough to do that, and we have other options in any event.

All we have to do is turn away from the devil and toward our Lord and Savior. He's been there. He's done that. He understands, and through the Spirit he can give us the strength to do what God calls us to do. When the devil comes knocking, we are called to just turn away and turn toward Jesus. Ask for his help, and he will help us find a way. If we seek his will through the Holy Spirit, then we can get the plan that God wants for us. *Amen.*