

Jesus Knows What It's Like

Matthew 4:1-11

February 10, 2008

I.

We just had quite a series of readings today, didn't we? Beginning with the Collect of the Day, and continuing right on through the Old Testament lesson, the Psalm, the New Testament lesson, and the Gospel, we heard consistent themes about sin and temptation.

And two of these were well-known Bible stories. First was the classic and fateful account of original sin; the fall of humanity when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Then there was the equally classic and pivotal story of Satan's temptations of Jesus after his baptism.

We heard how Jesus, in the wilderness of Judea, did what Adam did not do in the Garden of Eden. And we witnessed how the devil can tempt us with things that appear to be good, but in reality are destructive.

As a result, preachers sometimes use the temptation of Jesus as the model for humanity. They say that Jesus resisted temptation and was obedient to God's will. Therefore, they proclaim that we also should be able to resist temptation and remain obedient. Very Simple. End of Story. Just do what Jesus did. Right?

Well, perhaps there's more to it. Temptation is part of life. Adam and Eve did not resist temptation, and look what happened. Are we more like Jesus, or more like Adam and Eve? Some say we are more like Adam and Eve, and that's why Jesus came to live and die among us.

II.

Volumes have been written about these two stories. Most discussions of sin and temptation mention them in some way or another. Obviously I can't cover it all in detail today, but I would like to address two questions raised by the Gospel account of Jesus' temptation.

The first is whether the temptation of Jesus has any relevance to our lives today. The second is a brief examination of the insidious way in which temptation can work.

And in thinking about temptation, and how the devil tried to use Jesus' hunger to lead him to turn stones into bread, I'm reminded of the story of a fellow who decided to go on a diet for Lent, and who habitually had stopped at an ice cream store on his way home from work every day.

Well, he arrived home one evening still eating the remains of a large chocolate cone. His wife asked why he was eating ice cream if he was trying to diet, and he said, "I told God that if he wanted me to have an ice cream cone, there would be a parking place open right in front of the ice cream store. And sure enough, on the seventh time around the block, there it was!"

The message of this story illustrates the second question about how temptation works. It shows how we can rationalize doing things that are not evil in and of themselves, even though they might not be what God wants for us at the time. But let's begin with the first question. How does the story of Jesus' temptation apply to us, if at all?

III.

I would ask that we think like theologians here. Was anything unique about this dramatic confrontation between Jesus and Satan? Does something distinguish it from our own situations?

One difference immediately comes to mind. We are not sons of God, or daughters of God in the way as Jesus, and I don't think that a booming voice from heaven claimed to be well pleased with us at our baptisms. We do not have supernatural powers and cannot perform miracles.

So, did Jesus have a special advantage? Was Jesus walking around in the wilderness those forty days with an ace in his back pocket? Maybe he was immune to temptation. After all, Jesus knew that he was the Son of God and eventually would sit at God's right hand in heaven. Right?

And he also knew that the trials and tribulations he experienced on earth, including the crucifixion, were just temporary burdens to endure. He always knew that God had everything covered. He didn't need what the devil was offering. Right?

Maybe God worked it out so that the fix was in. Maybe the devil never had a chance with Jesus. When the devil gambles in God's casino, he's eventually bound to lose. So, the fact that Jesus, as the Son of God, resisted temptation because he had special advantages does not mean that we, as mere mortals without those advantages, can do the same. Right? Well, maybe not. And why not?

What if we're looking at it the wrong way? Let's try another approach. Perhaps we should say that of course Jesus had an ace in his back pocket. God put it there for him. And perhaps we're all in the same position. All of us, as Christians, are carrying that same ace because God, through Jesus, also put it there for us.

After all, so what if Jesus knew he was eventually going to heaven? That was not a unique advantage. Don't we believe the same about ourselves? So what if Jesus knew beforehand that his temptations and difficulties on earth were just temporary burdens to endure? Don't we believe the same thing about our own earthly burdens?

So, maybe it makes no difference whether God put the fix in for Jesus. The same fix also is in for us now. Jesus' knowledge about his destiny in heaven was similar to what we believe about our own destinies as Christians. So if Jesus could resist temptation, then maybe we should be able to do the same. Right? Well, perhaps so, but for different reasons. Let's look a little closer.

What if Jesus could have taken Satan up on one of his offers? What if he had turned those stones into bread? After all, he turned water into wine. If he could have accepted Satan's challenge, then he was not immune to temptation and the fix was not in. If Jesus could have given in, then maybe he didn't have an ace in his back pocket. Maybe he was just like we always have been.

That possibility rests in Jesus' nature. He was both fully human and fully divine. Both natures existed simultaneously within him. While it's a mystery as to how it worked, his human nature came into being with his birth in the manger, and his divine nature was imparted from heaven.

And, because of his human nature, perhaps Jesus could have chosen otherwise when tempted by the devil. His human aspect had free will just as we have free will. Perhaps the story could have ended differently. We don't think, do we, that Jesus merely was quoting from Deuteronomy as actors might read their lines? He consciously had to choose those Scriptures, didn't he?

Some supporters of this idea say that if Jesus had called upon heavenly powers to resist earthly temptation, 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 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 how that worked remain a mystery. This means we cannot disregard his divine nature, but we also cannot diminish his sacrifice because of it.

So when we look at the temptation of Christ, we can believe that he, like us, knows what it's like to be tempted. The Book of Hebrews tells us that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are" (4:15). He knows how Satan tries to separate us from God because he experienced it face to face in the wilderness. And he knows how clever and diabolical Satan can be in placing these temptations before us.

IV.

This leads to the second question I mentioned earlier. How can temptation work to separate us from God. The devil knows our weaknesses. Look at the reading. Satan wanted Jesus to use his power to turn stones into bread. Bread is a good thing. We all use it for nourishment.

And throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple to be rescued by angels could have saved time and effort. Everyone would have known who Jesus was right from the start, and he wouldn't have had to travel all over Galilee for two or three years trying to explain his message.

Finally, Satan offered Jesus a chance to take over the world right then, without having to go to the cross. Satan only required Jesus to worship him spiritually, not serve him or be obedient to him in the world. Satan offered Jesus full authority over the world, and maybe Jesus could have solved the world's problems on the spot.

At first glance these temptations could have been attractive. None would have been immoral or in violation of Jewish law. They might have achieved some good. Right? No, that's not right. Those three examples of good things in the temptations are false and just illustrate the twisted ways in which Satan works. In reality, they were designed to draw Jesus away from obedience to God's will and to defeat his own purpose on earth.

So, we always are called to remember that Satan does not tempt us with unpleasant things. They come 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.

V.

How do we deal with this? We cannot contend with Satan directly. And there is no need for us to confront him as Jesus did in the wilderness. We have other options. All we must do is simply turn away from the devil and turn toward our Lord and Savior. He's been there. He's done that. He understands, and through the Spirit he can help us do what God calls us to do.

Two closing thoughts here. First, if we do yield to temptation of some kind or another, as most of us do from time to time, whether large or small, we again can turn to Jesus with true repentance and seek forgiveness, and he will restore us to a right relationship with God.

But second, that does not mean we can sin whenever we want just because we think we will be forgiven. That would not produce true repentance and there would not be real forgiveness. The point here is that we are called to faithfully turn to our Lord and Savior in times of testing and temptation, and he will see us through. He knows what its like, and he is with us. *Amen.*