

Can Temptation Be a Blessing?

In Christian churches that use the Revised Common Lectionary, the first Sunday in Lent always focuses on Jesus's temptation in the wilderness. Mark, Matthew, and Luke all tell us that, immediately after his baptism, the Holy Spirit takes Jesus into the wilderness for forty days of fasting and spiritual combat. It's a strange, supernatural episode that we might be inclined to dismiss as fiction. Before we do that, though, it's worth noting that only the Holy Spirit, the Adversary, and Jesus are present here. The Adversary takes a beating in this encounter; it's unlikely that the demon who personifies malignant pride would want to discuss it. The Holy Spirit speaks to those with ears to hear, but in signs, nudges, and sighs too deep for words. I know of no instance where the Holy Spirit sat down and told anyone a story. The only way we could possibly know what happened in the wilderness is if Jesus told someone about it, perhaps his disciples or his mother. If this story comes from Jesus, and it must, it has to be true because Jesus doesn't lie. And that tells us something about Jesus, the Adversary, and temptation itself.

At first, there doesn't seem to be much here. The Adversary takes three shots at persuading Jesus to violate divine law, and Jesus bats them away with almost contemptuous ease. Some preachers use this episode to shame parishioners, building on the letter to the Hebrews to argue that Jesus was tempted just as we are but didn't sin, so anyone who sins just isn't trying hard enough. Respectfully, that's bunk. If a soul as illustrious as Saint Paul could lament that temptation led him to do sinful things he hated, temptation is real and sin is almost impossible to avoid, at least for us. Being the Son of God might have given Jesus an advantage, but the rest of us don't have that, no matter how much we love and want to emulate him.

As Bible scholar Fred B. Craddock points out, however, we shouldn't presume that Jesus wasn't really tempted by any of the Adversary's offers. Fully divine as he was, he was also fully

human, and human beings are inherently vulnerable to temptation. That Jesus ate nothing for forty days proves he had heavenly support from his Father – John Calvin was right that we shouldn't even attempt to imitate that supernatural feat. Luke tells us that Jesus was famished at the end of his fast, though, and that alone would likely have made him more susceptible to the Adversary's wiles. Still, Jesus makes remarkably short work of the fiend's offers in this passage. I suspect there must have been many more conversations between them over the course of forty days and nights. It takes less than three minutes to read Luke's telling of this story. Unless Jesus and the Adversary sat looking at each other in silence for over a month, other things must have been said to which we are not privy.

So, if this story comes directly from Jesus and we only know part of what happened, we might wonder if Jesus chose these three particular temptations to share with his followers and, if so, what that might mean. A parishioner recently reminded me of a tool that might help us understand. In 1943, American psychologist Abraham Maslow theorized that there is a hierarchy of human needs, which he presented in the shape of a pyramid. At its base are physiological and safety needs, then love, belonging, and esteem needs, with self-actualization needs at the very top. Maslow theorized that, until their foundational needs are met, human beings can't move up the pyramid to fulfill their higher needs. Interestingly, Maslow's pyramid nicely parallels the three temptations in this Gospel passage.

There's no more basic food in the world than bread, so nothing better symbolizes our basic needs for sustenance, shelter, and safety. Those of us who are fortunate never to have worried about getting enough to eat or losing a job or home may not see much temptation here. If you've ever had those worries, though, you know how much anxiety we suffer when our basic needs are at risk of going unmet. That anxiety grows when we try to meet our needs on our own

without looking to God for help. Jesus could have turned stones into bread, but that would have meant relying on his own powers rather than the support he was already receiving from his Father. I don't think Jesus is telling us not to do what we can to meet our basic needs. I *do* think he's warning us that, when we're afraid that our basic needs won't be met, anxiety tempts us to compromise our values and violate divine law rather than continuing to do what we know is right and trusting God to keep us steadfast until our circumstances improve.

The second temptation, worldly power, speaks directly to our needs for love, belonging, and esteem. Knowing the Adversary to be a liar, I'm skeptical of its claim to owning all the glory and authority of the earthly kingdoms, though there have certainly been political and corporate figures who made me wonder if their authority didn't come from darker sources. Maslow was correct, though, that people need to feel loved and respected. They need to feel that they belong. Worldly power, be it political, corporate, or cultural, seems to satisfy those needs, and people have gone to truly terrible lengths to achieve it. Jesus was right that we cannot serve two masters, though. However tempted we might be by power on earth, God calls us to seek love and approval from him, not the world. Jesus gave us his church for a reason. It can be a place to belong where you don't have to compromise your values or run afoul of heavenly law.

The third temptation might not seem to have much to do with us. Perhaps Jesus would have enjoyed an angel-assisted leap off the Temple but, for mere mortals, a fall like that would be fatal. This temptation becomes more relevant if you think of it as the need for self-actualization gone haywire. Once our more basic needs are met, people want to explore their talents, express themselves, learn, and grow. That's healthy unless it leads to excessive self-preoccupation or pride, the Adversary's favorite deadly sin. When the need for self-actualization gets out of control, it can be tempting to neglect our loved ones, walk over potential competitors,

and ignore the fact that any talent we have comes from God. That kind of arrogance is poison to the soul, and it doesn't do our relationships with God and one another any good, either.

Don't let the Adversary's apparent ineptitude in this passage fool you. It's fiendishly clever, it knows our weaknesses, and it loathes every last one of us. We can be grateful that Jesus can handle any temptation, and we can learn from how he did it. Jesus didn't hurl paragraphs of Scripture at the Adversary – just a few words were plenty. That tells me we shouldn't underestimate our ability to refuse temptation when we rely on God to protect us. And he stayed calm, which suggests that we can better resist temptation if we don't let it drive us crazy. The Adversary is persistent. Luke tells us that it didn't admit defeat but only left Jesus until an opportune time. It won't entirely leave us, either, which means we have to deal with temptation whenever it arises. When we slip up – as we will – the trick is to get back up without a lot of drama and try again. With God's help, no matter how many times we yield to temptation, we can always learn to do better. With enough practice, we may eventually learn how not to fall.

Temptation can make us do terrible things. But when temptation motivates us to turn to God, it can be a blessing. In the coming weeks of Lent, we are invited to prayerfully consider what temptations are particularly difficult for us to resist, then ask God for strength and solace. When you're tempted, don't see it as a sign of weakness. The Adversary reserves its most seductive temptations for the strongest souls. Rather, as St. Philip Neri, patron of laughter and joy, once said, "Do not grieve over the temptations you suffer. When the Lord intends to bestow a particular virtue on us, He often permits us first to be tempted by the opposite vice. Therefore, look upon every temptation as an invitation to grow in a particular virtue and a promise by God that you will be successful, if only you stand fast." When we pray, we ask our Father not to lead us into temptation. When we fall, let's remember to ask Jesus to lead us out again. Amen.