

Temptation

Jesus offers a different security system than ADT

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Lent 1A | Matthew 4:1-11
March 5, 2017

This is the first thing after.

A thousand things he could've done. Jesus is the Messiah, right? The Son of God. There's probably a few pressing things God needs done around the place.

The first thing he has to do after his baptism is to go into the wilderness to be tempted.

The context is always important. No less so here. Especially for us as we begin Lent. We're told to fast for 40 days, to look into ourselves and see what God is up to. We fast and we discern.

It was traditional then, as it is now, to go away for a fast. To go out into the wilderness for a long time. You don't think the idea of a cleanse is new do you? Only now we're doing it with juice.

So this wilderness cleanse really fits into our Lenten theme straight up. We often argue that stuff about the devil and the temptations is all theater. So we can talk about the fast and the wilderness and Lent and think we can compare giving up chocolate to facing off with the devil. He's got his own cake and everything.

But the context is important. And the temptations are important. And what they tell us is really important.

So this is the beginning of the gospel. John baptizes Jesus in the river. The previous verse is literally:

"And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"

In Mark's version, after the baptism, Jesus is rushed into the wilderness "immediately." That's the word there: "immediately."

There are no disciples yet. He hasn't hardly started. Baptised and then immediately propelled into the desert to fast for 40 days. Jesus is worn out. Hungry. Thirsty. Sunburned and lips chapped. Feet blistered and raw. He is done.

I have a hard time resisting the temptation of a Big Mac when I've skipped lunch. So if this is about will power, even the son of God would have nothing left at the end of 40 days. Right? Of course this is when the devil shows up.

And he does. In the wilderness, Jesus should be at the end of his rope. And the temptations are predictable if you know your Scripture and tradition. And have ever watched a movie.

He's hungry. Of course he'll be tempted with food.

He's the Son of God. Of course he'll be tempted with power.

He's the Messiah. Of course he'll be tempted with a kingdom.

But at this point, anybody listening to this story should recognize two things happening in these temptations. Two things we can see and expect.

1. Jesus will be tempted, but he won't give in.
2. We have already been tempted with these and have given in.

Power and Weakness.

Jesus will continue to be tempted throughout the gospels. Tempted by the devil and by the leadership. Tempted to change course or to begin to lose faith in God. Even Jesus will face his circumstances and question whether God really is with him. Those words spoken to him only once:

'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

Words not even for him. But for the crowd, for John. A father who speaks to everyone around him, but not to him.

Jesus will deal with his temptations throughout. Yet we often fail to face ours. Temptations to secure our safety without God. To take the law into our own hands. Temptations which go all the way back to those first beloved people, wandering in the desert. Given food and told to expect more, and even they, liberated from Egypt in a miraculous way, find themselves distrusting God.

Our distrust is harder to see because we call it prudence. Keeping us safe. Secure.

What the devil offered Jesus was earthly power and Jesus rejected it. Regardless of whether the devil is even able to give him this power, it isn't power Jesus is to have. Because that is the power of earthly kingdoms and messiahs. It's the so-called divine right of kings and the brutality of human power.

Jesus didn't come to build a kingdom. He came to usher in the upside-down, flipped economy of the kin-dom of God. Power in the Kin-dom doesn't come with control. Brutality. Security. The assurance that we're right. That we get our way. That the smartest win and that wealth is a sign of blessing.

It comes in weakness. It comes in mercy and gratitude. A kin-dom whose power source is love and whose assurance comes, not with certainty, but trust. A kin-dom co-created by humanity and co-delivered by a divine liberator. With our swords beaten into ploughshares.

The devil offers us power.

All the time. In everything. We call it safety and security. The affection for a preferred past and the fear of an uncertain future.

We're offered power in our work and our politics and our jobs. And our supermarkets. Power to demean and condemn and scapegoat. Power to complain about the poor or the weak or the underemployed. Or the powerful, whose very power traps them, silences them.

Power in our world is always offered to destroy. Like the power offered white sharecroppers during Reconstruction to deny

black sharecroppers. So they'd both be poor and under control.

We like to say power corrupts, but that makes it sound like there was a moment when we weren't corrupted by it. The power we have in birth. In life.

But real power, like the power Jesus uses, breaks the hold on us. The hold of fear and anxiety. Real power stands up to the devil's temptation, his power and shouts back

"It is written!"

Like an invocation Jesus shouts back at the devil. Not with a calm, rational, argument devised through post-Enlightenment wisdom, like the captain of the debate team. He rejects the power:

"It is written!"

Every time. Not like a proof-texter or a Biblical literalist. Jesus isn't using Scripture that way. He is going to the wisdom, the tradition. He is discerning the truth and seeking God's way. And this isn't it. Here, he can find it:

"It is written!"

More than words. More than scripture. It isn't safety or security or control. He isn't the master or the ruler. He is the weakest and meekest of them all, after a 40-day fast.

The power is in standing and facing, not the devil, but the temptation of power. The temptation to have the answers. And all the control he might have before him.

And he can throw it back because he knows none of it, none of this, declares the glory of God. But he does. And you do. In your brokenness and temptation. As Rachel Held Evans writes,

"we all move through the world in the same state--broken and beloved"

in need of being carried and empowered to carry others. Given the chance to stand up to the temptation of power, control, fear and say

"It is written!"

For we stand, not above the powerless, but among them. Loved by God. Like those peacemakers, Shalom-makers Jesus would go on from here and preach about. Children of God. Loved. Cared for. Attended by the other angels in our midst.