

Good Friday, 2016

Temptations Revisited

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We began our Lenten journey, with Luke's account of the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness. Let's revisit them: Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread, to possess all the kingdoms of the world, to demonstrate his immortality. In other words, he experienced the very temptations that humankind is prone to: to possess that which gratifies; to give free rein to our egos; to live a life free of limits or consequences. All of these temptations were presented to Jesus, prefaced with the words, "If you are the Son of God..." Jesus might have acquiesced to any of them. How easy it would have been, not only during that time of testing, but throughout his earthly ministry. And to have acquiesced, not because he would have been weak, but to prove a point and perhaps win some converts. And even more than that. To do enormous good.

Consider the turning of stones into bread. Think about how much good Jesus might have done if he routinely turned stones into bread, if he had fed the hungry people of the world. Wow. That would gain some converts. But he did something different, didn't he? All four gospels record his miracle of feeding of the multitude with 5 loaves of bread, where 5000 people were fed and satisfied, and 12 basketsful of leftovers were gathered up. John devotes an entire chapter to Jesus's teaching on the miracle he performed: that Jesus is the bread of life which has come down from heaven, and that whoever eats of this bread will live forever.

Or consider that business of being taken to the highest pinnacle of the temple and being offered all the kingdoms of the world. What a difference he might have made, had he simply commanded all of earth's inhabitants to obey him. Think about it! Everyone living according to God's purposes. No more warfare, no more suffering brought about through bad decision-making. Paradise on earth. But Jesus did something different, didn't he? He *was* lifted up, not onto the pinnacle of the temple, but onto a cross. Again, in John's gospel, Jesus taught that his crucifixion would be the means by which God is glorified. Political and economic powers come and go, as any student of history can attest. The glorification of God that Jesus proclaimed and enacted was not like that of any earthly ruler. It was, instead, God emptying himself of his divinity, accepting all the scapegoating ugliness heaped upon him, and responding not in kind, as any earthly ruler would do, but in sacrificial love instead, in order to draw all the world to himself.

Or consider that final temptation: casting himself down from the pinnacle to demonstrate his immortality. But Jesus was NOT immortal, was he? If he were, the crucifixion would be meaningless and his resurrection little more than a hoax. Jesus of Nazareth – the one in whom the Word was made flesh – suffered real human death upon the cross. He didn't merely appear to die. He died, but only after he had first been betrayed, abandoned, falsely accused, mocked, and tortured. He accepted the full agony of the human condition, and in so doing, took away its power to have the final say in our lives. He bridged the chasm between ourselves and God so that through his death and resurrection, we too may obtain eternal life.

To possess that which gratifies, to give free rein to our egos, to live a life free of limits or consequences. These are the ancient temptations of humankind. All the ways we misuse the gift of free will which God has given to all of us – a misuse which the Church calls sin – begin with one or more of these temptations. Consider the sacred stories Jesus himself would have known -- the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel, the making of the Golden Calf in the wilderness, David's rape of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. We can think of our own modern day examples as well, most especially and perhaps most regrettably, in the political rhetoric that bombards us in this

election year. Those temptations were well to the fore in Jerusalem that day. The religious and political leaders gave in to them. Jesus, alone, did not.

Make no mistake, those temptations endure. But their power to enslave humankind for all eternity was broken on that day in Calvary, by the one who nourishes us with his body, who was lifted high upon a cross to draw all the world to himself, who trampled down death by his own holy death. Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.