Sermon
Rev. Steve Domienik

Lent I
Year A 3-13-11
Matthew 4: 1-11

The Temptation of Jesus

Listen to the first line of our Gospel again ….

After Jesus was baptized he was led up by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

How can this be? Why would God lead Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil? Don’t we pray not to be led into temptation? Don’t we ask God to keep us safe? The Lord’s Prayer says deliver us FROM evil NOT deliver us INTO evil.

But here it is, clear as day. The Spirit led Jesus right into the grasp of the devil – why?

The customary title for this Gospel passage is “The Temptation of Jesus”. A better title would be the “Testing of God’s Son”. The concern of the passage is not whether the devil can lure Jesus into this or that sin, rather, it is an exercise to test what Jesus is made of – is he up to the task ahead of him – does he have the fortitude and strength to undergo the hardship – is he up to the challenge – is he the right man for the job?

The implication here is that the devil is working for God. Could this be true? Doesn’t this go against the commonly held belief that the devil is an independent adversary who is diametrically opposed to God?

In the OT, however, testing refers to the process by which the covenant partner is scrutinized to determine his fidelity to God. The most well known story is that of Job. We initially hear that God is bragging about his servant Job and so Satan, the tempter or the tester, says to God that Job is only faithful because he has been blessed with good fortune. The evil one says that Job would surely change his tune if things weren’t going so well. So Satan asks God’s permission to inflict suffering upon Job in an effort to make Job curse God. Reluctantly, God agrees to this request and the devil is given almost free reign to systematically destroy Job and his family. In the end, Job never wavers and remains faithful to God. Job passes the test and health and prosperity is returned to him.

Before Satan was given the task of testing people, God was the one who put people to the test. An early example of this was God testing Abraham to kill his son Issac, or God testing the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years after they were liberated from Egypt. In essence, God was testing these people to see if they were worthy.
Now this may seem harsh to our ears, but I would guess that many if not all of us have been tested in our lives as well. Who hasn’t gone through a formal test in school or professional testing to be licensed to practice in such areas as the law, medicine, psychology or accounting? And who among us hasn’t had to pass a driving test in order to operate a motor vehicle? And then there are the informal tests that we endure in relationships and social or employment settings. All of these exams are designed to assess our knowledge, skill, commitment and worthiness.

So why would we be surprised if Jesus had to undergo some testing to see if he was fit enough to be the Son of God? And that is exactly what we are told happened. The Spirit of God led Jesus into the wilderness to the testing site. But Jesus had an extra challenge. He had to fast for forty days and forty nights before his testing began.

Try having your children fast that long before they take the standardized tests at school. Parents would probably be charged with child abuse or neglect today if they tried enforcing that type of stringent preparation before a test.

Now our Gospel says that Jesus was tempted by the devil, and that the tempter came and challenged him to do three different things. We typically equate tempt with persuasion, inducement or enticement especially to do something immoral, illegal, wrong or against ours or someone else’s wishes. But the word “tempt” also means to test or try the strength of someone.

We also understand that all of us are tempted to do a wide range of things, sometimes we give in and sometimes we don’t.

Our society scoffs at temptation. Oscar Wilde once said, "I can resist anything but temptation" and "the easiest way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it."

Temptation looks good. It is pleasant. It is very attractive. We often trivialize temptation because we believe ourselves self-sufficient. We decide what's best for us. We think of temptation as the acceptance of evil when it is far more often the rejection of courageous good. We are so used to choosing what is easiest that becoming what God wants us to be doesn't even seem like an option.

Yet, we understand that only by facing temptation can we know of our ability to triumph over it.

In light of this, we should probably leave behind voyeuristic notions of the so-called "temptation" of Jesus in which we watch as the devil attempts to seduce Jesus into sin. What we have here is rather a time of testing, a rite of passage that Jesus has to undergo in order to begin his ministry.

So let us now turn to those three temptations and look a little deeper at what these tests were meant to evaluate.
The first temptation, to turn stones into bread, is often understood as challenging Jesus to misuse his miraculous power to satisfy his own hunger because he doubts God's provision. The challenge is not to perform a show miracle since there is not an audience in the wilderness. Rather it refers to the grumbling that Israel did in the wilderness complaining to God that they were hungry so eventually God sends manna and quail.

Will Jesus the Son of God fail the test as Israel did or will Jesus persevere in trust toward God? Remember, Jesus is famished after his long fast, so Satan urges Jesus to satisfy that hunger immediately. The first temptation, then, was to be selfish, to think only of himself. To satisfy an immediate urge or need without looking at the bigger picture.

The second test is to put God to the test, to see if God is trustworthy.

This second temptation is a spectacular use of spiritual power. Jesus is taken to the pinnacle of the Temple and told to throw himself down because God would send angels to rescue him. Turning from the physical needs of hunger to the spiritual realm, Satan uses this profound temptation to see if Jesus will use the divine shield to maintain his own safety. Will Jesus seek to avoid all pain, suffering and hardship? Whenever there is trouble will he call on Daddy to save him? Will Jesus adopt the attitude that he is invincible? That he can do foolhardy things throughout his life and not have to worry about the consequences of his actions? Jesus rejects this enticement. He chooses the harder road and we know where that journey will take him on Good Friday.

The third temptation is the one that still plagues most leaders in our world today. Political power – control of vast territories, empires and resources. To be the most powerful leader in the world.

Remember, that first century Jews were expecting a Messiah to be an earthly king, a strong military conqueror who would defeat the Romans and regain all of Israel’s ancestral homeland. A mighty warrior who would lay waste to Israel’s enemies and rule the entire world bringing peace and prosperity to God’s chosen people.

Jesus could have had all of this – fame, riches, power. He could have been the Messiah people wanted him to be. All he had to do was bow down and worship Satan. I find it amazing that we still use this language in our society today. We often describe people who seem to have it all as “selling their souls to the devil” in order to achieve their level of success. The temptation is real. Who will we serve?

Jesus reviewed his options, made his choice and took a stand. He could have had it all, but he decided to shun the easy path. With all the energy he could muster, he emphatically cried out, “Away from me Satan I will serve God alone”!

Jesus passed the tests. He never uses his message and work for his own ends. He does not use his faith to get something selfish for himself, nor make of this faith an easy career for
himself. He turns down all the glitz and glamour that the world has to offer in order to
follow God’s plan rather than his human desires.

We too are plagued with similar tests. For the most part we can avoid the temptations that
would take us down an illegal or immoral path, it is the temptations that deal with
positive things that cause us the most struggle. Whether it is looking out for our personal
needs, seeking an easy safe path or dreaming of wealth, position and status, we face the
same struggles Jesus did.

Will we invoke God’s authority and power to achieve our own goals and desires? Will
we put God to the test? Will we sell our soul to the evil one in order to achieve worldly
profit? Or will we like Jesus, choose to put our trust in God alone and seek to serve God
in all things?

Now we probably don't think of it this way, but temptations are actually a privilege that
comes with being children of God. The old saying is that if you don't know where you're
going, any road will get you there. And what temptations do is they challenge us to see if
we're sure about what direction we're headed in life.

Like Jesus, we are tempted to conform, to be something that we aren't.

Satan does not appear to us in an identifiable red suit with a pitchfork. The tempter
appears as a sensible way to meet our needs. The devil's nagging voice is the lure to do
what is easiest, fastest and will result in the most gain. We end up hungry for the wrong
things. When we follow this path, we push ourselves away from God.

Temptations are a fact of life. Each personal experience of being challenged by test
calls forth a profound inner experience that requires a faith response.

The tests that Jesus was subjected required that he make a life direction decision. Jesus
shows that obedience begins with listening to God's word spoken in the depths of a
person's spirit.

Isn’t our real prayer to not succumb to those temptations which will certainly come our
way?

During this time of Lent, we are called to take stock of those temptations that we all
encounter. We have the opportunity to prayerfully consider what we are being offered
and to ask God for direction. Will we choose immediate gratification in the things we
crave? Or will we be patient and trust that God will strengthen us for the journey and lead
us on the path that is true?

My hope and prayer for each of us this Lent, is this: That the Holy Spirit will lead us to
that place where we need to be tested. And once there, that God will give us the strength
and will to choose wisely so that we too will pass the test.
AMEN