

## Knowing Your Price

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at  
First Congregational Church  
Lebanon, New Hampshire  
17 February 2013*

*Luke 4.1-13*

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."' Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

Some years ago, a member of Congress remarked, "everybody has his price. I just never want to know mine." It was a candid, frank observation, one that reflected a recognition of humanity's fallen state, of his own fallibility. Each of us can be bought off; none of us is immune to temptation. Yet, if we acknowledge what we're up against, if we can see what's really going on and what's at stake when temptation presents itself, we will be better prepared to accept God's help, God's strength to resist that which entices us to stray and instead embrace God's call to be his people.

That's the primary lesson of today's Gospel reading, which contains one of the most familiar of New Testament stories: the temptation of Christ. In short, Jesus, having headed into the wilderness for forty days, finds himself being tempted by Satan. Jesus resists, the devil gives up – if only for the time

being. Now this is an accurate summary, but it's not a sufficient telling if we are to understand this passage. This is a vivid account, one filled with arresting, compelling imagery. But more striking than the images are the ideas that fill the story, for they tell us a lot about Jesus and his ministry – and a lot about the kinds of temptations that you and I can face.

The first time the devil tempts Jesus, he encourages him to turn stones to bread, a clever proposition given that Jesus must be hungry. The second time, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth, offering him rule over them all, a seemingly seductive prospect to any man, especially one who is to save the world. Then, for his third test, the devil dares Jesus to throw himself from the Temple roof to show that he will be protected by God, a not unreasonable challenge to the one professing complete confidence in his Maker.

Now, I'd like for us to spend a few moments looking at each of these temptations, because they are not random. Rather, as we will see, they tell us much not only about the surprising guises temptation can take but also the nature of Jesus' ministry and just how serious, even existential a threat, it posed, and still poses, to the powers of darkness in the world.

First, turning stones to bread. On the face of it, this seems not so much a challenge as a helpful piece of advice to simply use the resources at hand to meet a legitimate need. Luke, after all, tells us that after his forty days in the wilderness, Jesus was "famished."

So, why not conjure up some nourishment?

Why not turn a couple of rocks into a nice loaf of whole wheat bread?

It's not as if Jesus couldn't do this. After all, we know that in the future, he will turn water into wine, feed 5,000 with just a small portion of food, even raise the dead. Providing himself with some sustenance surely would have been an easy thing to do. But what does Jesus do? Does he fabricate food from nothing? Does he give in to his appetites? No. Instead, he tells the devil that, "One does not live by bread alone." And here is the first clue as to what Jesus is all about.

Jesus believed that his ministry was about the fundamentals – about convincing people to live a new kind of life, one rooted in God, not the material things of this world. Jesus knew he would have to work hard to win over followers. And here we witness how he sees through the devil's challenge that really wasn't an invitation to Jesus to satisfy his hunger. Rather, Jesus is being asked to take shortcuts. The devil, as we will soon see, tries to bribe Jesus. And he suggests that Jesus do the same to those he would call disciples.

Remember, ancient Judea was a difficult place to grow food. Little of the land was arable and irrigation techniques were primitive. So being able to provide an abundant supply of bread would have made Jesus extremely popular. He would have had all the followers he could ever want. But they wouldn't have been drawn to Jesus' message, to travelling the Way he was describing. Instead, they would have followed him only as long as he could provide them with food. If, when, the supply ran out, they'd run out on Jesus. He didn't seek a fan base; he sought disciples. So, Jesus declined to turn stones into bread, opting instead to go hungry for forty days and signaling early on that he would not try acquire a following, let alone try to build a community, through bribery.

The second test involved an offer of a completely different magnitude. This time, the devil is playing in the big leagues, offering Jesus the whole proverbial shooting match. Jesus would be given rule over all the nations of the world – if only he would bow down to the devil. A steep price perhaps, but imagine, just imagine, what Jesus could accomplish with such authority, with such power!

He could expel the hated Romans from Judea, restoring to his people their long yearned-for freedom. He could establish fair and just government throughout the world, remove all despots, vanquish all corruption, lock up wrongdoers, provide opportunity to the worthy, feed the hungry, clothe the poor, heal the sick, repair a broken, fallen world, restore humanity, indeed all Creation, to its prelapsarian state.

It would be amazing. It would be incredible. It would be wondrous.

Except.

Except.

Except for that small bit about worshipping the devil.

Those of you who took economics in school may remember the old adage, “There is no free lunch.” Jesus may not have studied Keynes or Hayek, but oh how he knew this to be true. He well understood that he could not accept the devil’s bargain because no matter how well intentioned, a truly just society could never be built on a morally compromised foundation, that it’s not possible to achieve to lasting good while cutting deals with evil. And so he rejects the devil’s offer, choosing to remain loyal and true to the only one who is worthy of our worship and service, the faithful, living God.

Third, we have the incredible, and, even within the context of this particular narrative, somewhat bizarre episode atop the temple. Take a moment to imagine the scene: Jesus and the devil, just the two of them, on top of this magnificent edifice. Below them bustling, teeming crowds conducting their business, coming and going from worship, seeing the sites. Surrounding this grand temple is the city of Jerusalem, a crossroads filled with Jews and Romans and people from all corners of the world. It is an exotic, exciting place. But back up where Jesus and the devil are, high atop a pinnacle, quiet reigns. The only sound far, far above the capital is that of the wind.

It is here that the devil issues his final challenge. “Okay,” we can imagine him saying, “You’re the son of God? Prove it. Jump. If you’re telling the truth, God will save you.” At first this test might have seemed a tremendous opportunity to witness to the power of God. Jesus could have thrown himself from atop the Temple and when he was saved from certain death, the miracle would win over the watching multitudes.

Yet he once again demurs.

Jesus knows that one does not fool around with God. One does not put the creator of the universe to a test. Instead, one trusts in him, wholly, implicitly. And so, Jesus rejects the devil a third time. He refuses to win followers through sensationalism.

Thwarted, the devil leaves – if only for the time being.

So, what does all of this tell us? Temptation is serious business. It is worth thinking about, especially in this season of Lent. Now, when many people think of temptation, they think of sin. And to be sure there can be an element of that in temptation. Yet it is so very much more. N.T. Wright, the former Anglican Bishop of Durham, England who now teaches at St. Andrews in Scotland, writes that, “Jesus recognizes his temptations as distractions from worshiping and trusting the one true God. To see temptation in terms of rules we would like to break, or impulses we must learn to tame, is to succumb to a second tier temptation: to see temptation itself in terms of negatives.”

I think Tom Wright is onto something important here. God wants to have a relationship with each and every one of us. His decision to come here to be among us in the person of Jesus was his way of trying to communicate this point to his people. God is willing to go the greatest of distances to find us. The only logical response on our part is to in turn go out to meet God.

Yet this seems easier said than done. There are so many distractions, so many forms of temptation. Fortunately, the season of Lent can help us deal with these things. The six weeks spreading out before us offer a wonderful time to clear the decks, to undertake some spiritual housecleaning. We can use these forty days to ask ourselves what keeps us from worshiping and trusting God. And we can then work on ways to resist those temptations and distractions so that we might then fully let God into our lives.

Some of you may have already adopted a Lenten discipline. Perhaps you give something up. Consider yourself the latest practitioner of an ancient spiritual discipline. But I would encourage you to ask yourself why you’re doing this – if it’s to punish yourself, or deprive yourself, if it’s motivated by some kind of guilt, don’t bother. Keep eating the chocolate and drinking the coffee. However, if in giving up something you are trying to create a daily reminder of your desire to draw nearer to God, then I believe you are travelling on a holy path. Similarly, for those who might take something on during this time. Don’t bother if doing so is just going to create a resentment-generating burden. Do so only if your new activity is going to help you prepare for Easter – and the new life that lies beyond.

There are many things we can do during Lent. I'd like to offer one suggestion. This year, I am reading one Psalm each day, reflecting on what I read, and then taking a few moments to pray. I never cease to be amazed at what I find in the Psalter. There is always something new to think about, something worth contemplating. So, perhaps you'd like to do this, too. Even if you don't, I do hope you'll choose some discipline this Lent. For this season, whether spent in the wilderness of Judaea or right here in the Upper Valley, offers each of us the opportunity to draw nearer to the God who eagerly awaits our return. That's not always an easy thing to do - even Jesus faced temptation, even Jesus was presented with the challenge of contemplating his price. But it's always, always worth the effort, and we don't be doing so alone but with the power and grace of the God who made us and loves us.