

If...
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16, Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13
February 29, 2004 (Lent 1)

We read those awesome words from Romans, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,” and what do we think? Do we think, “Wow, we’ve arrived!” Do we think “All we have to do now is relax and rest in God’s grace and favor?” If we do, we’re believing in what Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” I’ll take it a step further: now that we’re saved, we know God loves us, we know we’re God’s children--a part of God’s family, joint heirs with Christ. But that doesn’t let us off the hook. Our gospel text reminds us far too clearly that, once we’ve been saved, once we’ve accepted Christ, the journey is just beginning.

Look at Jesus. Right after his baptism, right after God has declared, “You are my beloved Son.” he was led into the wilderness and was tempted. If Jesus faced temptation after being declared God’s son, what makes us think our lives will be easy, once we’ve been declared God’s children?

Let’s look at Jesus’ temptations. Let’s see what we can learn from his experience. Luke tells us that after the 40 days, Jesus was famished. Then, when he was most vulnerable, the temptations came. Isn’t that the way it is with us? Wouldn’t it be nice if temptation came, like the Olympics, or the final exam, or the track meet--when we were ready for it--when we were at the peak of our form? But, no, it comes when we least expect it; when we are unprepared and in situations and guises that catch us unawares. And temptation has a persistence about it. Someone has said. “Opportunity knocks only once, but temptation pounds on the door incessantly.”

Notice how the Tempter begins, “If you are the Son of God...” Was Jesus wondering, there in the desert, what it meant to be God’s son? We know, looking back, the shape his ministry took, but was he, during this time, trying to decide just how God wanted him to go about his awesome task? Or is it possible that after 40 days of fasting, when he was tired and hot and hungry, he was even wondering if it was true? Does temptation come to you this way. “If you’re really my friend you’ll... “ If you’re really in control you’ll be able to...” “If you want to be beautiful, or popular, or rich, you will...”

The tempter continues, “If you are the Son of God, turn these stones

to bread. There they are--they're brown and they're round--they even look like bread. And if you're God's son, you'll be able to do it." There may have been the implication: "What kind of a leader will you be if you can't even provide for yourself?" When he was tempted Jesus had the answers. Look at his response. Does he say to Satan, "I see your point, bread is good, but maintain my fast is better." No! He quotes scripture, saying, "We don't live by bread alone but by every word that comes from God." He's, in effect, saying, "I'm not going to discuss good and bad and right and wrong with you. What's important is my relationship with God and what God wants me to do." He does this as well with the other two temptations that Satan presents. He quotes scripture--and it's always scripture that has to do with our relationship with God. It helps to know that this verse refers to Israel's receiving manna in the wilderness. When they were hungry, God provided manna because "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Israel's need for bread was secondary to Israel's need for God.

Sometimes temptations seem like such minor matters. Turning stones to bread seems such a minor thing. Jesus could have said, "No one will ever know, and I'm so hungry." Let me tell you a true story. Some years ago on a Saturday afternoon a pastor in a nearby town bought a step ladder in a hardware store. On Monday morning he brought it back, saying he didn't need it after all, and the hardware store owner gave him his money back. The only thing problem was that that evening the owner happened to mention the incident to his daughter, who had attended the youth group meeting the night before, when the pastor used the stepladder. Perhaps it seemed like a minor thing to the pastor. Perhaps he rationalized by saying, "After all, the ladder is just as good as new." But in the eyes of that family, he was never again seen as a man of integrity.

The second temptation is much more dramatic. "You can have power--you can rule the world. Just think of all the good you can accomplish--you can bring peace, you can see that people are fed, you can save the environment, If you'll just worship me. Just take the easy way to your goal--Let the end justify the means, just compromise a little."

Through the centuries stories have abounded about people who sold their soul to the devil because they wanted something very badly. The ancient story of Faust is just one example. In some versions he wanted magical powers. In other versions he wanted knowledge. Then there is the

musical “Damn Yankee” in which a simple guy named Joe wanted the Yankees to win the pennant so badly that he sold his soul to the devil. (Now I really don’t care for the Yankees, so I don’t understand this at all!) In both cases the men valued something more than their relationship with God. The men had made an idol and put it in God’s place in their hearts.

Before we dismiss this too quickly let’s think about it a minute. Have we ever put something in the place of God? Is there something else that competes for the center of our being? Something else that we depend on, rather than God, something good, even noble--like our career, or our country, or our family, or even our church? But again Jesus has the answer, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’”

The devil is a quick learner. If Jesus answers by quoting scripture, he, too, can play that game. “If you’re the son of God, prove it. Throw yourself down from the temple, It is written the angels will bear you up, so you will not dash your foot against a stone.” Notice what’s happening here, the tempter who has used all these ifs, is now suggesting that Jesus play that game with God. Go ahead Jesus, say to God, “If you love me, If I am your son, save me.” What a splash this would make! What headlines would appear in the Jerusalem Times! Has this ever been your temptation? Have you wanted to say to God, “If you’re there, you’ll do this for me?” Or, “If you love me, you’ll do this my way?” Or have you ever had anyone say to you, “IF you just have enough faith God will give you what you ask for?” Someone has put it this way: “We demand that God do nothing but care for us. We make God meet our needs. We ignore GODS will for US” This temptation is the most popular one inside the Christian community.

But, again, Jesus has his answer ready, “It is said, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

The tempter left Jesus it says, until an opportune time. If we’re honest with ourselves, we’ll admit that for us there are far too many opportune times. Every day there is the temptation to do less than our best, to speak disparagingly of someone, to do something we know we ought not to do, or to leave undone some kind or generous act. How can Jesus’ example help us? First he was filled with the Spirit--he was led by the Spirit. As we open ourselves to the spirit of God, we receive strength to resist temptation.

Secondly, notice that Jesus quoted scripture. Perhaps there in the

desert, he was thinking about Israel's desert wanderings because he chose verses from Deuteronomy, which is supposed to be Moses last sermon to the people. He knew the scriptures so well that the appropriate verses came to mind when he needed them. If we could steep ourselves in scripture, we too would find answers in times of temptation.

Third, Jesus' answer to all the temptations brings us back to our need to put God first in our lives. God is more important than satisfying our hunger and our desires. God alone is the one we should worship. We are not to test God but rather seek God's will in every situation.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all notice, again Jesus' words: "One shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." For us this takes on added meaning because Jesus is himself our best, our most complete, Word from God. Jesus is therefore the one we live by.

And so we return to the place we began: to the enormous, marvelous fact that God loves us. Jesus has come to prove that. God loves us and wants us to be restored into a healing, living giving relationship. What if we began our Lent with that--with opening our arms and saying, "Yes, I accept for the first time, or for the hundredth time, the salvation and love you offer me in Jesus. But, following our Lord's example, we must not stop there. Rather, we say, "God, I respond to your love this Lent by doing what I can, giving up things to remind me of your gift, praying to improve our communication, reading scripture to learn your will, doing whatever I can, not to earn your love, but to keep myself open to you and your love."

We may fail in our resolves, we will certainly fail in our attempts to avoid sin, but we have the joyful news that God still loves us, still waits for us with open arms, still forgives. And that, friends is the good news of the gospel.

Amen