



Lent 1 2010 Luke 4. 1-13

The movie *The Crucible* is about the Salem witch trials of 1692 and in the film the character John Proctor is being tried for witchcraft which he denies. Proctor is given the choice to confess to being a witch and he will be saved from the gallows but he refuses to perjure himself because he is innocent.

Now the prosecutor knows he is innocent and the witch-hunt is out of control and so he tries to convince John's wife Elizabeth to plead guilty and to convince her he tells her that God holds it less of a crime for a person to lie than for a man to throw away his life.

Elizabeth who is pregnant, thinks this over and how tempting it would be how easy it would be for her to get her husband home safely and to preserve her family and then she says very calmly "I think that is the Devil's argument".

Today's gospel is all about temptations and the devil's arguments. The temptation story happens just after Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan River where he hears the voice of God speaking a blessing over him – "This is my beloved Son" - God claims Jesus as his own. And then, immersed in the Holy Spirit Jesus, like so many of the prophets, is led by the spirit – driven by the Spirit into the desert where he is tested.

Jesus goes without food 40 days and nights he's hungry, baked by the sun chilled by the night – thirsty and blasted by the wind and the sand and he hears a new voice – and it's the voice of Satan. This is not a voice of affirmation and blessing – it's a voice that casts doubt and uncertainty – Satan tries to confuse Jesus tries to cast uncertainty on Jesus' identity "If you be the son of God"...

And it becomes clear that the devil can quote scripture – but only imperfectly. Satan says to the hungry Jesus "Change these stones into bread" after all we "do not live on bread alone". Satan only quotes the first half of Deuteronomy 8.3 – Jesus finishes the verse that we live on "Every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God".





Satan then dispenses with scripture for the second temptation and shows Jesus the kingdoms of the earth all the powers in a twinkling of an eye and says “All these are yours if you worship me”. Jesus counters again with a quote from Deuteronomy – “Worship God alone and serve only him”.

Finally Jesus is taken to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem and tempts Jesus to leap from the temple to the earth – a staggering 450 foot drop to the valley below - “Jump off - you’ll be fine – you won’t even bruise your foot” and he quotes from Psalm 91 that the angels will catch him in their arms. Jesus confronts Satan again with a final quote from Deuteronomy with a flat outright “Do not put your God to the test”.

Three temptations – which Jesus overcomes. They are at the start of his ministry likely Jesus is in the desert to think and plan how he is going to accomplish the work God has set before him and these three trials are his first challenge but what are they all about?

In the first temptation Jesus is encouraged to make bread for himself but also he is presented with the idea that as the Messiah he can win the crowds by feeding them – meeting the basic need of survival wins the crowds – it’s worked countless times before and besides the Messiah is expected to give bread from heaven – Isaiah 25 speaks of “a banquet of richest food and wine”. Jesus rejects this in that people need more than basics to survive and to have dignity – they need the affirmation God gives them and every word that comes from the mouth of God feeds the heart.

Satan’s crudest power grab is to offer the powers of the earth to him. Here, Jesus is offered the throne of Caesar – all the good he could do for people as their ruler – certainly the Zealots and the fanatics expected a military man Messiah. Jesus rejects this as incompatible with the spiritual kingdom he wants to establish – he wants to win the hearts of people not their vote or allegiance.





Lastly Jesus rejects the offer to win people by spectacular displays of power through miracles – “special effects” we call them today what more potent than to awe people through showmanship such as the leap from the Temple? Jesus once again rejects this for it means that he would be proving that he is of God and faith is about trusting in God – besides- people are only won in a shallow way by glitzy shows.

What is common in all of these temptations is that all of them can be seen as a fast means to a good end. All three of them seem to be attractive shortcuts into achieving Jesus’ goal of winning people over. But all three of them also would mean Jesus becoming independent of the Father and losing himself in the process and because Jesus knows who he is – the Beloved Son of God he does not succumb to them nor to the suggestion “If you are the son of God” he knows he does not have to prove a thing.

By being well-grounded in scripture and in his blessing Jesus can resist temptation - even the last temptation on the cross when the crowds say “If you are the son of God come down from the cross and save yourself”.

This gospel demonstrates that the most dangerous temptations are those that seem to lead towards a good end. And it warns us that when we are about the business of church we must be careful that the things we do and say in God’s name – even when those things look very attractive - are in fact good and to be especially careful the business of the church is not about being a business.

As individuals, this opening gospel of Lent urges us to carefully examine ourselves to see honestly the motivation behind what we do and say – especially when we act in Christian service to see whether those things are in fact godly – or whether they spring from other less desirable sources such as pride or selfishness.





Lastly, this gospel urges us to take our faith with seriousness – perhaps the greatest temptation we as Christians in this society have is to think of our faith as just “something we do when we want to” – as “just another option” another “club” or worse we may think our “Christianity doesn’t matter much anyway”.

I remember once a parishioner told me that she couldn’t come to Ash Wednesday because “it was her Scrabble night and she didn’t want to disappoint her friends” - almost sounded noble the way she said it.

A devil’s argument is clever precisely because it wraps itself in good intentions, and good intentions slip easily by our attention. This time of Lent drives us into our own desert to carefully honestly examine our lives and our motivations and our individual ministries. God give us discernment and wisdom to listen to the voice that also calls us the Beloved children of God.

Amen.

Rev. David Peterson

