

The Devil is in the Details
1 Lent - February 21, 2010
Luke 4:1-13

The devil, they say, is in the details. Every year we hear the story of Jesus being led by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil - Satan - in the wilderness. It's easy to slide over the devilish details because they are so familiar. It's especially easy to slide over that business about Satan. How many people really believe in a snarky dude wearing a red union suit, brandishing a pitchfork and reeking of brimstone?

Perhaps we shouldn't be so dismissive. Union suit or not, there is a power of evil shadowing the world. Theologian Jeffrey Russell writes: "For Christians, the person of the Devil may be a metaphor, but it is a metaphor for something that is *real*, that really brings horror to the world every day and threatens to lay the entire earth waste."

This evil force lays waste to the entire earth by attacking *each individual* in strategic ways. Jesus, who shares our humanity, is no exception. Calling this assault "temptation" is bland; that conjures up cravings for chocolate, playing hooky, or buying a plasma TV on sale. Only if we understand temptation as "sorties by an enemy power scouting out our vulnerabilities," do we begin to get a handle on its danger.

Frederick Bruner describes Jesus' temptation by Satan as a three-pronged assault. The first thrust was to a weak spot. Jesus went

straight from his baptism to an ordeal in the wilderness. He fasted forty days; he was weak and hungry. "If you're the Son of God," Satan whispers, "turn stones into bread!" In other words: "Did your Baptism mean anything? What do you have to show for your Sonship? Prove it! Your Father won't give *you* stones when you ask for bread, will he?"

Bruner adds: "The form this satanic voice assumes in addressing *disciples* is something like this: "How can *you* claim to be a child of God when you are *struggling* with big problems instead of being victorious over them?" The voice instills *doubt about God's promises*.

Think of your unanswered prayers. Think of the struggles you or your loved ones face. Haven't you ever thought: *if this religion stuff is real I should be sailing, not struggling*. If my faith is really strong; if God is really good, shouldn't this addiction, conflict, failure, illness, or doubt be gone like a bad dream?

This is war. When you're already weak and wounded, what weapon do you have? *The one Jesus himself uses*: the Sword of the Spirit; the Word of God. The Spirit, who descended upon Jesus in baptism and led him into the wilderness, *didn't* leave him in the lurch. Three times, Jesus obeys the Spirit and overcomes Satan by recalling Scripture. Bruner writes, "He teaches us that God's nourishing will is discoverable in God's Word and is present in a church that *reads Scripture like bread*."

Where the church feeds on the law and gospel of Scripture she will be given the guidance she needs to minister to her time."

Yes; we need ordinary bread; visible help; real remedies; genuine justice. God knows that. But when they're not there, or when we rely so heavily on them that they become substitutes for God himself, there *is* one sure, enduring, and powerful weapon: The Spirit-filled Word of God. *We have God's promise of forgiveness, blessing, guidance and redemption in writing.* We don't need to conjure up another "sign" of his loving purpose for us. It's there in black and white; and in the very human body of his crucified Son, the Word made flesh. Center yourself *here* when you are assaulted by temptation, and you'll be on solid rock. Those rocks Satan pointed to are there to *stand* on - not to eat!

If the devil can't make us doubt God's Word, maybe he can tempt us to presume upon it. Satan tries to twist Jesus' strong faith and deep knowledge and love of Holy Scripture to devilish ends. "Jump off the Temple spire! For it is written, 'He shall put his angels in charge of you and they shall bear you up lest you dash your foot against a stone.'"

"Fine," Satan seems to say. "So you won't turn stones into bread. So you're standing on the solid rock of Scripture. So claim it. *Trust* it. Glorify God by taking him at his Word!" How often the Church is seduced by selective quoting of Scripture as it ponders deep issues of

doctrine, faith, and ethics. How often it swings from rigid literalism to free-wheeling reinterpretation. How many people have been led into sin and despair because the Church they trusted led them astray. Bruner notes, "In this temptation Jesus experiences one of the most surprising sources of radical evil in the world: *the perverse use of Scripture.*"

This might be Satan's favorite tactic with pastors, bishops and theologians. It's a reason the Society of the Holy Trinity, to which Pastor Rod and I belong, was formed; it helps us remain faithful to our ordination vows, and it is a greatly-needed gift to the Church.

One of the Society's founding documents, the 9.5 Theses, addresses this temptation. It borrows Jesus' own weapon in opposing it. For he answers Satan's Bible-quoting thus: "In another place, Scripture says, 'Don't you try to test the Lord your God!'" The Society, guided by the Creeds and the Lutheran Confessions, should also thank John Calvin; for he put it well: "When we are tempted by a false use of Scripture, let us borrow weapons for the defense of our faith *from no other source than Scripture.*" The *whole* counsel of God is to be canvassed when important decisions are made. Bruner notes that "when one Scripture is used to encourage behavior that most of Scripture, or the heart of Scripture, *discourages, we can tell we are in enemy territory.*"

That enemy has at least one more weapon up his union suit. If

tempting Jesus or his followers to doubt or to presume upon God doesn't work, then he goes for the jugular. Frederick Bruner calls this the "vocational point;" it can be understood as "if you undermine this, you call my whole life's purpose into question." In any case, for Jesus, his vocation was his love for God's world - remember John 3:16?

What if Jesus could have established peace, justice, health and wholeness for everyone without going to the Cross; by just giving Satan a friendly nod? As Bruner points out, Jesus wasn't being asked to spend his whole life at the devil's feet. He's given a bargain: one momentary bow; the Greek word describes one single act, not a continuous process. What's one gesture when the fate of the world is in the balance? Loving the world wasn't just Jesus' vocation, but his Father's will. Wasn't it more important to put that into action than to quibble about details?

This hits close to the bone, especially when we're moved by love and pity. We long to show our love in ways that make people's lives better; that lifts up, affirms, respects and welcomes them. *God wants us to love them as we love ourselves.* That is *our* central vocation, isn't it?

But Jesus says no. "Get out of here, Satan! For it is in writing: you shall worship the Lord your God; and him alone shall you serve!"

I'll quote Bruner. "The saying 'love is always the will of God' is questioned by this temptation. It is often true that an act of love is an

act of God; *but there can be acts done in love that are demonic if they are not controlled by a higher love.* The immoral lust, the lethal "liberation," the lying success may all be done out of, and even deliver, a certain love to someone else, *but they are not Biblical acts of love in the depths nor are they helpful to persons at length.* Jesus is ruled by a love higher...than that for the other person: and that is love for God."

Created in the image and likeness of God, we are created for love. We're created to have love at the very core of our identity. We're created so that if we do not love one another, we cannot be said to be God's children at all. How terribly tempting it is for any of us to let love for our children, our spouse, our community or country, be the be-all and end-all. How tempting it is to proclaim a Gospel of unconditional acceptance and love for the outcast, the stranger, the marginalized.

How terribly, terribly tempting it is to make the second part of the "Love Commandment" stand in for the whole of it. "You SHALL love you neighbor as yourself." True! True! True!

*And deadly, deadly, deadly, if it is not embraced by, conformed to and in obedience to the primary commandment: you shall love **the Lord your God** with all your heart, mind, soul and strength!!*

But the story of the Temptations of our Lord isn't told in order to frighten, but rather to warn, encourage, and equip us for a battle

that has already been won. In Luther's Large Catechism, we read: "Satan is called the master of a thousand arts, but what shall we call God's Word, which easily conquers and discomfits that master with all his wile and power?" Luther answers his own question: *God's Word forever shall abide, no thanks to foes, who fear it. For God himself fights by our side with weapons of the Spirit.*

Word and Sacrament: these are the weapons of the Spirit, given to us by the Father in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, so that no matter what devilish details are thrown our way in life, we are never left in the lurch, left to our own devices, left to grapple with Satan with our own paltry and badly-compromised resources.

. To quote Bruner one last time (you can tell I appreciate his wisdom): "Jesus' Baptism {and, I would note, our Baptism into his death and resurrection} can encourage believers with their resources against temptation: the almighty Father above, the conquering Son beside, and the strong Spirit within.... Jesus teaches us that our spiritual warfare is with a *defeated devil* because we are in the company of a *conquering Christ.*" To that let us say: Thanks be to God; amen and amen!