

“Temptation is a Good Thing”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – March 6, 2022

Luke 4:1-13

Every year, Lent begins with Jesus in the desert as he prepared for his ministry. Throughout the scriptures, deserts are places of purification.

I lived in the desert around Tucson, AZ for four years. I became acquainted with the factious term, "dry heat." But the desert has a lot to teach us about spirituality. The desert does not have as many interruptions. It does not draw the eyes to constant movement. The sun shines, and things are calm.

While there I learned that the desert was an excellent battleground for the soul. The desert isn't busy; it allowed me to quiet my mind so I could hear my soul. When you quiet the mind, temptations often follow. But one thing I have learned about temptations: Temptations are a good thing.

Why? Because they give us a chance to solidify vocation. They encourage us to grow, but they are hard. They test our faith to see if we stand firm or break. Temptation is uncomfortable because we usually encounter it alone. But most spiritual journeys begin with a desert. Moses lived in a desert for forty years, Jesus was there for forty days.

The writer says Jesus wandered the desert and Satan tempted him in three ways. Each one is significant, and each one informs our spiritual pilgrimage. Each of the devil's temptations attempt to push Jesus into a natural kingdom and out of the spiritual kingdom.

The devil told Jesus, “TURN THESE STONES TO BREAD.”

First Temptation: To be the Great and Selfish Provider

Jesus was in the desert without food for forty days. Temptations present themselves during exhaustion. When I’m drained, I’m prone to focus solely on self.

That's when the devil said, "TURN THESE STONES INTO BREAD." In an hour of exhaustion, the temptation whispered, “perform a miracle for yourself.”

The ego tempts the same way; it will do anything to keep us from realizing that instant gratification can't satisfy. I've even prayed for instant gratification; "God, I need you to fix this right now because it hurts!"

Sometimes we want the hunger to stop so badly we try to turn the rocks of addiction and denial into food. Do you know why? Because real soul growth hurts.

Growth takes life, death, and life again. That's how you make bread! The wheat grows from a seed to the full ear. Then it dies, and they grind it to flour. That's when they knead it, and later they bake it in a fire.

Sounds like stages in my life.

Jesus didn't take the bait. He said, "YOU CAN'T LIVE BY INSTANT GRATIFICATION ALONE, YOU NEED TO WAIT FOR GOD'S BREAD TO COME OUT OF THE OVEN."

Then the Gospel says the devil tempted Jesus to be a savior through the sword.

Second Temptation: The Powerful Politician

"THE DEVIL SHOWED HIM ALL THE KINGDOMS OF THE EARTH..." Talk about an ego trip, the king of the known world.

The Jewish people in Jesus's day assumed the Messiah would be a political figure. He would run the Romans out once and for all. The Messiah had to liberate his people by natural means. That is what their scriptures said. We even see the disciples repeatedly tell Jesus they are ready to fight and die for the cause.

Jesus didn't meet the expectations of a Messiah. He didn't save through kingdoms, countries, corporations, or governments. Jesus defied the temptation to become the politician culture demanded. He chose the spirit over the sword.

Jesus didn't need to take over the nations as emperor.

The political sword is a well-disguised demon. We seldom see it because it's parasitic. It quietly steals the soul and still demands more to eat.

How do I know? Because politics have grown into the modern American religion. I know people who have the news on their TVs all day long. Candidates run for office with the idea that they want to help their community but soon it turns into what they can get out of the office with little concern for the people who got them there.

It has turned into an obsession, and that eats the soul. People will fight for a political candidate more than they fight for Jesus.

The devil said, “you can be Caesar.” Jesus knew his call was to be a spiritual healer and not a political power.

But one more temptation remained...

The Third Temptation: To Become the High Priest

“THE DEVIL TOOK HIM TO THE PINNACLE OF THE TEMPLE AND SAID, ‘JUMP, THE ANGELS WILL CATCH YOU.’”

He took Jesus to the top, the pinnacle, of religion. The temptation said, “stand atop as a ruling Caesar who even governs the people’s food.”

If Jesus rejected the role of self-provider and powerful politician, perhaps the devil can seduce him to become the high priest.

Here's the compelling metaphor: This temptation is where the devil quotes scripture to Jesus. He used holy words for unholy means.

We have all watched this with spiritual leaders, bishops, priests, denominational leaders, even popes, abuse their power and manipulate scriptures. The temptation of the church is to harm people in the name of God’s will. The devil offers the narcissistic satisfaction of speaking for God.

There’s a temptation in the church to demand allegiance to one, or all, of these archetypes.

But Jesus said, "GET BEHIND ME SATAN, MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD!" The kingdom was within.

The denial of earthly powers granted Jesus the title of “The Great Physician.”

The soul doesn’t call for a magician, a king, or a bishop, it calls for a compassionate physician.

This Gospel passage is about soul health. It’s about detachment from sin and ego, and an invitation to love and hope. Mother Teresa said, “God did not create us for success, but love.”

So, in Lent, let's walk with Jesus through the desert and accept the temptations. They can be good things because they present opportunities to see our true vocation: love.

Amen.