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Mayflower 1/10/10  
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Radio 1/17/10

Luke 4:1-

## THE TEMPTATION OF THE CHURCH

The story of the temptation of Jesus is one of the supreme examples in the Bible of how the gospel writers took the great themes of Judaism and recast them as Jesus stories. I used to love this story in Sunday School, because I thought it proved just how strong Jesus was when it came to resisting temptation, a real superman who could resist even the most appealing offers of power, fame, and special protection. Now I realize that the whole thing is meant to show that not only was this Messiah not the Messiah some people expected, but that our Jesus stories could compete with those Moses stories any day.

All the great Jewish archetypal themes are here. Jesus is led into the wilderness for 40 days, just as the Jews wandered in the desert for 40 years. He is famished, and is tempted, as were the children of Israel, to do anything to eat, including going back to Egypt. They resisted and were rewarded when God sent manna from heaven, just as Jesus resists, and will become the new Moses who liberates all people.

Moses is said to have been with the Lord for 40 days and nights during which time he neither ate nor drank, but was taken up on a high mountain. Even the first myth, the story of Adam and Eve is reflected in the temptation of Jesus. For what is Jesus being offered really, but the chance to be like God, just as Eve was tempted to eat of the forbidden fruit and become wise, knowing good and evil?

In other words, these are *real* temptations – to turn stones into bread and become an economic messiah. What would be wrong with that? He is hungry, his people are hungry, and he could set up shop in the desert: people could bring him rocks and he could turn them into bread, and everyone could be fed. If you don't think that's a temptation, then you've never heard the sound of a hungry child crying.

But he says, "One does not live by bread alone." One of the most familiar lines from the Bible, and it's interesting what we do with that line today. It is usually uttered by someone who wants something that is not absolutely necessary, something desired but not required. "You want a Porsche 911?" Well, one does not live by bread alone!

So for us it has become more of an excuse than a philosophy. But the temptation for Jesus was to limit his ministry to the production of food, and leave human hearts unchanged. Certainly people must be fed, but not just bread.

Even so, in a land where people lived on the edge of starvation, think how tempting it would be to become the Manna Man. The food Savior. Got Rocks? Get Bread? Why not? But he says no.

Then this devil inside his own head takes him up to a high spot where he could look out upon all the kingdoms of the world. And the voice said, "I'll give it all to you if you will just worship me." I call this the Donald Trump temptation. You can have it all if you will just give me your soul, as one master of the universe to another – its mine to give. And Jesus said no – I will only serve God. So much for the Messiah as conquerer and king.

Finally, he is taken to Jerusalem and placed on the highest spot on the Temple, where the devil dares him to jump off to prove that he is indeed the son of God. After all, it is written that the angels will protect him, and besides this would amaze the crowds and set them buzzing. I mean, just imagine the effect this stunt would have on those leaving the temple after a long, boring sermon by the rabbis. "Hey, people, Jesus here. No, up here! Forget all that boring legalism. I'll show you God's favor. Mothers, it's OK, let your children watch!"

I must confess that since 9/11, I cannot get the thought of people jumping from a tall building out of my mind. Many died instantly of course, but many faced the most agonizing decision of all – burn alive or jump to one's death on the street below. We saw those pictures, men in suits going down headfirst, -- their ties streaming behind them. A couple holding hands and jumping together. It was horrible.

But that's what I mean when I say these temptations are real. Bread for a hungry world. Jesus as King of the World in a world full of terrible kings. And most of all, perhaps, special exemption from the deadly forces over which we have no control. Those bad things happen to good people. We could use a little magic if you ask me – to cure cancer, to turn back global warming, to save our democracy from the imbeciles who are destroying it.

There's a reason why we like superheroes. At least they give us a fighting chance. And Jesus said no? So we will get no exemption from pain and suffering, and we can't trade our faith in for a kind of cosmic insurance against tragedy and even senseless cruelty. Bad things will happen to good people, and good things will happen to bad people. Well hallelujah. Then why don't we just join the Epicureans: eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die (if not today).

I'll never forget when Fred Craddock told me in class one day that people tend to think that temptations come only to those who are weak, and that to be tempted is a sign of weakness. In fact, just the opposite is true. Temptation indicates strength, not weakness. One is tempted

only to do that which lies within one's capacity. The fierceness of this struggle in the desert is a testimony to the power of Jesus, not to his weakness.

One of the great temptations of those who have ability is to do anything to get noticed. Oh, sure a good sermon is fine. Take that Sermon on the Mount – that was a stem winder. But why not back it up with a few cruise missiles, just in case someone wasn't paying attention? You know what's going to happen if you go through with this whole strength through weakness program. The prophets tried it, and it didn't turn out well.

Sooner or later they come and get you and hang you up like all the others and it breaks your mother's heart. Come on Jesus, says a voice inside Jesus' head. Nobody's going to give you a seat at the table. I've got some easy cash. Sub-prime. You deserve it.

Don't waste your life trying to change people. People don't change. You could be a genuine superstar in the religion business. People have had it with the rabbis, and attendance at temple is way down. I say Jazz it up a little Jesus. Get a handler, get a press agent, do some advance work before you head to Galilee. Otherwise what have you got? "Local boy has a vision, says 'Follow Me?'"

These temptations are no private morality game. It is the ultimate showdown over the shape and substance of ministry itself. Jesus will choose to preach the good news to the poor and release to the captives, and he will do it entirely outside of the temple – where he will be immediately opposed by those with vested interests, and ultimately by Rome whose job it is to own the world and keep the peace.

We miss the power of this text if we stand over the shoulder of Jesus and cheer him on, knowing that to Jesus a temptation is like a feather in the path of a bulldozer. Not only did Jesus have to deal with them, but to this day, the church continues to be tempted, and often, in quite dramatic and even pathetic ways, the church fails.

I will give you just two of the most recent examples. Just recently I told you that I had been working on a story with a reporter from CNN over whether or not Jesus was rich. You laugh, because in fact there is not only nothing in the Bible to suggest he was rich, but mountains of evidence that he was poor. Even the myths told about him, about being born in a manger to Jewish peasants on the run place him among the poorest of the poor. He teaches about the hazards of wealth, and prays for enough food to eat every day.

But if you are preaching the prosperity gospel, like the Rev. C. Thomas Anderson, senior pastor of the Living Word Bible Church in Mesa Arizona, you build an elaborate and truly fantastic case that he was not poor at all, but rich.

The Rev. Anderson says Jesus could not have been poor because he received lucrative gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh as a birthday present. Jesus had to be wealthy, Anderson

argues, because the Roman soldiers who crucified him gambled for his expensive undergarments. Even Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, lived and traveled in style.

“Mary and Joseph took a Cadillac to get to Bethlehem because the finest transportation of their day was a donkey,” said Anderson. “Poor people ate their donkey. Only the wealthy used it as transportation.”

What's more, because the disciples had a treasurer, the argument goes, “a keeper of the money bag,” he must have been rich. Another prosperity gospel preacher put it this way, “The last time I checked, poor people don't have treasurers to take care of their money.” Besides, if he was poor, then he would never have attracted large crowds. And he said, “the poor you have with you always, but you will not always have me” – meaning he did not count himself among the poor, and so he must not have been poor.

Now we laugh, but this is no laughing matter. If one can twist the logic of scripture this completely, and take advantage of people who will believe anything they are told, the church itself can fail the test of temptation. Only the poor, and slaves, were executed. Most of the parables of Jesus are about the rich abusing the poor, and how God stands with us on the side of the poor, not the rich.

But you see if you are a prosperity gospel preacher, then you NEED to preach a rich Jesus, so that your followers will be inspired by the prospect of what will happen to them. That Arizona pastor said that at first his sermons about a rich Jesus ruffled a few feathers, now his church has 9,000 members. I'll bet it does. If I started preaching the prosperity gospel, we could get 9,000 in here (well, not in here, but we could add on).

The only problem is, I would have failed the test of the gospel itself, with its radical message that God stands with those who have nothing while insisting that they are not nothing. The gospel is, from start to finish, about liberation, not about acquisition. Indeed, too much stuff just gets in the way. Like the rich young ruler who could not part with his stuff to follow Jesus. If Jesus had been rich, he could have just said, “Hey, put it all in storage for a while. That's what I did. It'll be there after we come to power.”

The temptations of the church are not any different than the temptations of Jesus. We are called to be in the world but not of the world, and yet the world wins most of the time. Prosperity gospel preachers are tempted to teach that Jesus was rich because they are rich, and they have succumbed to the temptation to fundamentally distort the gospel in order to make it say what they need it to say.

We do this all the time. The other day I heard a preacher from Tulsa arguing in favor of the death penalty who claimed that the New Testament argues in favor of the death penalty because it deters crime. One example he used was the story of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane when he is arrested and one of his disciples draws a sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest. Jesus as you know tells him to put the sword away and even miraculously restores the ear. “He

who lives by the sword shall die by the sword” says Jesus – which sure does sound like a repudiation of violence to me.

But no, says this preacher. Since the high priest was innocent, and the law allowed for capital punishment for the death of an innocent, Jesus was really telling his disciple to put away the sword because if he killed the high priest the disciple would be put to death – proving that Jesus knew of, and accepted the death penalty.

As to the argument that the death penalty should be eliminated because often innocent people are executed, the preacher went on to say that Jesus was the victim of capital punishment, and yet look how well that turned out.

Now you might be thinking, “Well, thank goodness the Bible isn’t simply marked up to say exactly what conservatives want it to say, or the next thing you know they will come up with their very own Bible,” but guess what? A group calling itself the Conservative Bible Project has decided that the Bible has gotten too liberal and needs a little editing. They believe that most of the translators have exercised a liberal bias and are trying to corrupt the youth. Obviously, we are about to get the FOX News translation of the Bible, otherwise known as the King Rupert Murdock edition.

They hate the gender inclusive language, which they say has “emasculated” Christianity. They think that the idea that words actually change in meaning over time and need to be updated is a plot. Some translators have actually used the word “comrade” on several occasions as the most accurate translation of a Greek word and obviously Jesus did not have comrades!

And they argue we need to accept the logic of Hell, rather than downplaying the very existence of Hell or the Devil. And this new Murdock Bible will express free market principles, which are the real object of the parables of Jesus, who believed in unregulated free market capitalism.

And they don’t like the fact that some stories were added later, in particular they want to take out that story of Jesus forgiving the woman caught in adultery who is about to be stoned. It does, after all, depict Jesus stopping an execution in progress, which the pro-death penalty preacher from Tulsa conveniently omitted, and it exposes the hypocrisy of her accusers, and so it is all just too soft on crime and New Agey.

And get this, the editors of the new Conservative Bible want to eliminate certain words, like government – clearly not something that has any redeeming value to God.

And again we laugh. But again, there is something deeply sinister about this, because what the church is really doing here is being tempted and failing the test. If we can make the Bible say whatever we want it to say then we can say anything we want and claim the Bible agrees with us! Prosperity preachers *need* a rich Jesus and so, presto – now we’ve got Jesus wearing a Rolex. Conservatives *need* the Bible to be a Father knows best, spare the rod and spoil the child

free market manifesto, and so “wha la,” we’ll just cut those uppity women out of the Bible entirely. I don’t know what they do about Acts 4, which depicts the early Christians as owning nothing and sharing everything in common. I think they need to cut that out right away.

Now, I hope you are wondering, do liberals do this too? Yes. I’ve heard some tortured interpretations of biblical passages by liberal theologians, including a feminist theologian who tried to convince a group of us once that the Pharaoh of Egypt was a woman.

Our challenge as the church is not unlike the temptations that faced Jesus. We must feed the poor, but with more than bread. We must never think of church as another empire to rule the world, so that we endlessly occupy foreign lands to protect our addiction to oil while we baptize the heathens on the side. And we must never promise people special exemption from pain and sorrow, as if God becomes your magic protector as soon as we confess our faith in Jesus.

The church has a future if, and only if, it recovers its original anti-imperial subversive quality. It will give something precious to people only insofar as it gives them an option on the madness of our time in this empire. We do not live by bread alone. We are not meant to be conquerors, but lovers. We are not given any gold-plated exemptions from pain and sorrow – only the faith to extract meaning from both the good times and the bad times.

Even the disciples of Jesus argued over who was greatest in the kingdom to come. They jockeyed for positions in the new Jesus Administration. Peter was furious over the idea that Jesus would be killed like a common criminal. Avoid the cross, he said, and seek the throne.

No wonder we say it every Sunday....”Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil....

Amen.

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## Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, January 10, 2010

Lord of Life, we have come to this place from the warmth of our homes in order to experience the warmth of a beloved community. Since you have sent us here, we have a special responsibility not to fail one another. Church is not just another social event, a place to see and be seen. It is not a place to do business, to hand out our cards or to seal a deal. It is not even a place for the lonely to check out the available singles.

It is not a place to assuage our guilt for having so much in a world where so many have so little. It is not a place to applaud performances and then fail to perform even the simplest act of kindness. It is not a place to earn credits against a backlog of demerits in order to graduate to heaven. It is not a place to show how smart we are, or how politically correct, or how chosen by our European sophistication.

This is a place to step out of the world and its stupid frenzy. To think of the other at least as fondly as we think of ourselves. To pray for and befriend the enemy. To feed the hungry, first with food if there is nothing on their plate, or with just a simple word of encouragement if they have stopped believing in themselves. This is a place where we serve up our presence with no strings attached in a world where it always seems that there are strings attached.

We are not at the mall. We are not at the market. We are not in school. We are in church. A place that could, if we took it seriously, be stranger than any place in the empire. A place where the cold get warm, the hungry get fed, the sick get well, the lost stumble upon grace, and the fearful find a voice that says "fear not."

Our prayer is simple. Against the odds, Lord, make us a church. Amen.

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