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Mayflower 2/21/10  
4:1-13  
Radio 2/28/10

Luke

### **VERY, VERY TEMPTING**

I chose to have Chris read a contemporary translation of this story because we need to remember that language in its native form is the world of sound, not the world of print. The first hearers of this powerful story were just that — hearers (not readers) of the word. Jesus did not say, “Let those who have eyes to read, read.” He said (in that largely illiterate culture), “let those who have ear to hear, hear.” The gospel is a conversation, made up of stories, and as I am always telling my public speaking students, what the ear wants is different from what the eye needs. Stories need to be simple, vivid, and memorable — and if several things happen, make it three. The ear likes three.

Eugene Peterson, who spent ten years translating the Bible as faithfully as he could from the original Hebrew and Greek, has an ear for language, and I like what he has done with Luke’s version of the temptation of Jesus by the devil. You know, the Evil One, Lucifer, Satan, Beelzebub. Don’t we just love stories about the devil, songs about the devil, deals with the devil, saying “the devil made me do it!”?

Especially that last part. If we can assign blame to some autonomous force that has set up shop in us, or is riding shotgun with us in the Cadillac of life and keeps grabbing the wheel and steering us over the cliff and down into the ravine of sin, then we won’t have to admit that we alone are responsible for our actions. It would be much more honest when we sin if we said, “I made me do it!”

In Peterson’s translation, he uses Devil with a capitol D, which I take to be a promotion. In our pew Bibles, you might notice, the d in devil is lower case, and that’s not just a stylistic comment, that’s a theological one. Since I believe that God is love, and that sin is caused by the complete separation of human beings from that Love, I don’t believe in the Devil with a capitol D. But I do believe that humans are “bedeviled.” That they are constantly struggling with real temptations — and that almost all of them ultimately have to do with whether I should consider

only myself when I choose to do something, or all those for whom my decisions will have consequences.

I also count myself among those who believe these temptations are *real* — that is, they are very, very tempting to Jesus because otherwise the whole thing is a cartoon. You, know, *Jesus, Jesus, he's our man if he can't resist temptation, no one can.* Let's not stand over the shoulder of Jesus in every story and grin, as if the outcome is certain because our man is “the man.”

These are real temptations. To magically make bread in a world where children cry at night, their bellies pinched with hunger — to be an economic messiah in a world that begs bread — that's a real temptation.

Or the offer to be made instantly the King of the whole world — just think how much better Jesus could run things than Caesar! I say give the man some power so he can get something done. Obviously you can't just talk about hope and change, you need power — and even then it's not as easy as it sounds. I say give Jesus the throne and the line-item veto, and everything will work out just fine.

Or how about the promise of divine protection from harm — who wouldn't want some of that? God as my cosmic underwriter, yea though I walk through a world full of constant danger, I will walk under the red umbrella of the heavenly Travelers. This makes me think of the Mastercard commercial. Cost of one unregulated itinerate ministry, with crowd control and cleanup: five talents; cost to repair roof torn open by friends of the paralytic who lowered him down to be healed, 750 shekels; cost of traveling expenses for Roman officials to oversee mock trial and standard execution: three talents. Chance to save the world without so much as stubbing your toe: *priceless*.

And to be honest, having hung out too long with the Jesus Seminar folk, I have a feeling that since Luke wrote his gospel as late as the eighth or ninth decade — or even later than that if some scholars are right—this list of temptations probably has a lot to do with what the early church was hearing from its detractors. Like, so what exactly was this messiah of yours supposed to have accomplished? He hasn't come back and we are into the second and third generation of Jesus People, and guess what: People are still hungry; the rich and powerful are still running the world; and it would appear that none of you followers of The Way are getting any special exemptions from the effects of gravity.

I can even imagine Luke, the NT's premier story teller, sitting down to create this story as a way to explain why the ministry of Jesus is still misunderstood, and why Jesus rejected all the conventional messianic scripts that had been handed down for centuries and which any self-respecting messiah would have followed: 1) you deliver food to the poor, 2) you acquire worldly power and influence and throw off your oppressors, and 3) you are protected by the angels as you go about your work. These are not unreasonable benefits. These should be part of the package.

Oddly enough, I think that in this story, the devil gets it, and we still don't. The devil knows exactly where we are vulnerable, which is precisely at that place where we can rationalize anything to make it sound noble instead of self-serving. Let's try this. Let's see what happens if on top of Peterson's lyrical way of telling this story, we add even more contemporary elements to it. I'm going to make a stab at an even more contemporary translation. We will not copyright this, nor will we even suggest that it ever be published. It might be best, in fact, if we kept it to ourselves. Ready, here we go . . .

First, Peterson has this section heading for the story: TESTED BY THE DEVIL. I'm going to change that in my version to this: ON NOT SELLING OUT.

*Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit but not yet absolutely certain what he was supposed to do with the rest of his life, left the friendly confines of John's wilderness retreat and baptism seminar and wandered so far out into dessert that he knew nobody could find him or stare at him as he fasted and agonized over what to do next. He stopped eating, for a long time, and got more than just hungry. He started hallucinating.*

*The devil in his head, sniffing out his weakness, and playing on more than just the pain in his belly, started trying to seduce him with offers too good to refuse. He began with flattery: "Since you're God's son, let's see if you can one-up Moses and turn some of these rocks into bread." When Jesus hesitated, his eyes rolling back in his head, the devil continued, "What? You're going to tell me bread is bad, and then turn around and teach your disciples to pray, 'Give us this day our daily bread'? This is how it feels to be starving, so don't get all theological on me.*

*Jesus feeling trapped, tried to remember a line from Torah school, Deuteronomy wasn't it? Yes. "It takes more than bread to really live."*

*The devil laughed, a big deep, out in the desert where no one could hear it belly laugh. A big, mocking jolly, bad breath laugh from a big bad belly that had never fasted, not even once—then he said, "Good luck with that as your campaign slogan."*

*Jesus, meanwhile, felt like he might pass out, but the devil said, "Hey hungry boy, stay with me here, I'm not through. How 'bout I give you the keys to the Kingdom of Stuff. Yeah, I'll make you the Caesar of Conspicuous Consumption, the Sultan of Stuff--all of it; all the pretty stuff in the world, with all the pretty people who make all the pretty stuff--and plenty of storage, and lots of yes men and women who will bow down to you, and bathe you, and lie to you because you sign their checks. Come on Jesus – big cigars and motor cars. What do you say?"*

*And Jesus, for some strange reason, thought of his mother. When the subject turns to money, Jewish boys always think of their mothers. "I could set her up so she would never have to worry about anything; make an irrevocable trust, take a load off her single-mother mind—since, let's face it, my dad may just be a figment of some gospel writer's imagination someday."*

*That's when he remembered his favorite rabbi, and Deuteronomy again: "Worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God." Serve him without compromise.*

*Now the devil is getting impatient. All this self-denying idealism is getting to be too much, and besides, his reputation is at stake. And so he pulls an ace out of his crooked hand and puts Jesus on the roof of the Temple and says, "go ahead, golden boy, jump! God will surely bail you out because you're too big to fail. Give us a little something for the evening news, something for You-Tube, something for the kids to twitter about."*

*"We're all afraid of falling Jesus, and you can go straight to the head of the class. People love magic and they confuse it with miracles, and this is the right way to kick off your ministry. The devil even quotes Psalm 91, the verse that promises protection for God's chosen ones, as if to say, I can play this Bible trivia game too. Let's put it to the test. Go ahead Mr. Moony Eyes, jump!"*

*And Jesus said, but it is also written, "Don't you dare tempt the Lord your God."*

*And that's when the devil decided this was not his day, and said to himself, "I've had enough of this, for now. This is one tough cookie . . . but I'll be back."*

Well, so much for my completely unauthorized version of the temptation of Jesus. I only attempted it because this business of getting people to hear the word of God in their own time and in their own language with their very own ears is the business of preaching. The words can and must change, but the meaning must not. You and I may never find ourselves in a knock-down duel with the devil in the desert, but we face temptations every day. Real temptations.

For example — I'll bet some of you are wondering right now about how much you can get away with when it comes to your income tax return. Everybody cheats a little right? There are people in this room right now who are having extramarital affairs, or are considering it, and have already figured out how to explain why they couldn't help themselves if they get caught. This, by the way, is the moment in a sermon when my preaching professor said that it's good not to make eye contact with anyone in the congregation. Just stare out the window!

Here's a big temptation right now. Some of us are tempted to give up on this country, which faces a threat greater than all the foreign enemies arrayed against us — namely, the influence of big money and corporate power to destroy our democracy. In case you hadn't noticed, just a year ago some of us were hopeful that change was coming, and the only change we have seen is that when it comes to dysfunctional, take-no prisoners partisan politics, the only change is that it's gotten worse — in fact nobody has ever seen it this bad. Our government is now seized up like an engine without oil. I'm tempted to move to Canada.

Some of us are tempted to give up hope, to stop giving other people the benefit of the doubt, to stop doing good deeds because we think no good deed goes unpunished. That's because the most tempting thing in the world is cynicism. To cash in your chips and join the party, to eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die — and to live by the most disastrous of all credos: *it's all about me*.

No, it's really not. It's all about us, all of us who have the great good fortune to be part of a community like this one, and a country founded on principles bigger than what shall we eat, what shall we wear, and where shall we go tonight. Large, compelling ideas like the equality of all men and women, the rule of law, and the idea that justice is not just for those who can afford it; it's for everyone.

If our Lord can say no to anything short of what God has in mind, then so can we. If he can imagine a world where everyone is fed but life is more than bread alone, then so can we. If he can turn away from the seductions of material wealth and status in order to give his life to something more than stuff, then so can we.

If Lent is an inward journey, then let's take it. If we must face down temptations bigger than our taste for chocolate, or more important than losing a few pounds, then let's say no to what doesn't matter so we can say yes to what does. I for one refuse to give a damn about the choreographed confessions of Tiger Woods so the PGA can get back to business as usual. The big story is not Tiger being hugged by his mother for the cameras (and by the way if she had been a good mother she would have slapped him), the big story was in the New York Times and it was disturbing. Did you know that right now, among men age 22-54, 20% don't have a job. That's one in five men in the prime of their earning years. For them this is a depression.

What America needs to give up for Lent is our addiction to celebrity culture, so we can have a grown up conversation about what grownups should be doing at this critical moment in human history.

And by the way, if you are so stupid that you believe that a blizzard in Washington is proof that global warming isn't real then you're too stupid to be a U.S. Senator. We've got big problems, and we are running out of time. The church will have to play its part by recovering its very soul, which is not about saving souls, but about showing the world what justice looks like. To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Or do we think that God has given up on us? Isn't that the biggest temptation we face? I say we quote Deuteronomy with the best of them: "Don't you dare tempt the Lord your God."

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, February 21, 2010

Lord of Life, we woke to the sound of rain and thunder; spring cannot be far away. The earth will keep its ancient promise, if we let her, but the question is will we keep our promises? Do we have the will to make the sacrifices necessary to repair the damage to our system of government, to our basic sense of fairness? Right now, we seem intent on destroying our own country just to win the next election. Right now, too many put nothing ahead of themselves, and in the pursuit of power, they consider nothing out of bounds.

This is the Lent of our discontent, and in a nation where so many claim to be Christian, my prayer is that they would read the story of the temptation of Jesus — and then ask ourselves honestly, “What is tempting us to take the low road in our time? How have we failed to be faithful to a vision of a viable future for our children and their children? When did we lose the soul of our democracy, and replace it with the buying and selling of everything, and of everyone?

We need a rebirth, a reawakening, a revolution in thought, action, and self-understanding. And we need it now. Help us, we pray, not to give up, sell out, or give in. We’ve come too far to turn back now . . .

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, our Teacher and Lord, Amen.

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