



February 10, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Genesis 2:15-17

Matthew 4:1-11

“But it seemed like such a good idea”

Every year on the first Sunday in Lent we hear a Bible account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. We remember what happened to him, and consider how it relates to our lives. We know temptation is a universal experience, so this story helps us to see Jesus truly as our brother. He is like us; he’s faced temptation and wilderness struggles. He knows what it’s like to feel powerful impulses to act contrary to God’s will. This is one of the mysteries of our faith: God, in Christ, was tempted to stray from God’s will! It’s mind-boggling, but sure tells you something about how much God loves us--- that God would become flesh and take on our struggles and burdens--- to be truly *one of us*.

Jesus had just been baptized by John. God identified him as “my beloved son”. Then, with his garments and hair still damp, “he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

The story of Jesus’ temptation is many-layered, like a tiered bakery cake. At the bottom lies the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent’s proposal that they “become like God”. Matthew shows us that Jesus faced the exact temptation they faced. Adam and Eve were not evil for wanting KNOWLEDGE—we have often misunderstood this creation story. The sin of Adam and Even was seeking knowledge of GOOD AND EVIL. They wanted to be LIKE GOD—beings who would DECIDE what is right and wrong. They wanted to sit on thrones over all creation, making decrees and passing judgment on others. This temptation thrives in our lives and world today. There is nothing that brings so much suffering and evil into the world as our setting ourselves up as “gods”.

Jesus was also tempted to do this. It may seem strange to us that it wasn't appropriate for him, since he was God incarnate! But apparently God-in-the-flesh needed to show us the way to relate to God our Creator: in humility and obedience.

A second layer to the story is that of the people of Israel, wandering for 40 years in the desert after Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt. Like them, Jesus had to face a barren and forbidding place, and a barren and confusing time. Jesus' experience was also close to that of Moses, who spent 40 days and nights fasting, communicating with God.

So, Jesus was like Adam and Eve; he was like the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness; he was like Moses; and he was like us, too. What a powerful message! Jesus is our brother! But that's just the beginning of what this story teaches us. Christ's experience teaches us the nature of temptation. We learn that temptation **sneaks up on us; the strongest may be the most vulnerable, and it never stops attacking us** in this world.

Let's consider these. Notice, Jesus was not tempted because he strayed from God's will. He was **LED** by the Spirit into the desert. Think about it. It's generally the obedient who are struggling hard with sin- being opposed and tested at every turn. Those who don't concern themselves with God's will don't seem to have the "fightings without and within" that the more serious Christian may face.

Temptation is the strongest in the strong. Being powerfully tempted does not indicate weakness. We can only be tempted to do what we have the power to do. The greater our power, abilities, capacities—the greater our temptations. The fierceness of Jesus' desert struggles attests to his power.

Don't think this lets any of us off the hook, however. We ALL have IMMENSE power in certain arenas. For example, if you are married, you have great power to build up and support, or tear down and harm your spouse. If you are a parent, or grandparent, you have power that comes close to ABSOLUTE power, especially with minor children for whom you are the legal guardian. So, your greatest temptations will often occur in your interactions with the people you love the most.

Those with power, and those most seriously committed to God's will are highly vulnerable to temptation. What else do we learn here about the nature of temptation?

"But it seemed like such a good idea at the time!" How often have you heard this? How often have you said this? An action that appeared to be good, wise, constructive, suddenly and mysteriously backfires, wreaking havoc right and left.

We open our eyes in innocent horror—how could something that seemed so right have turned out so wrong? We had the best of intentions, didn't we?

Look at the temptations of Jesus:

- Turn stones to bread. In a world of hunger, why not?
- Leap from the pinnacle of the temple. In a world cold and skeptical, numb to sermons and lessons, why not shock people into belief in God and God's power?
- Enter the political arena. In a world of slavery, war, oppression and disregard for life and rights, why not?

The story of Jesus' temptation shows us how temptation sneaks up on us- coming disguised as good. Temptation rarely appears as a horned, scaly monster with a hideous face.

Temptation also comes to us BEYOND the PERSONAL. Of course we all face personal temptations: to smoke, drink too much, overeat, cheat on income tax, lie about our whereabouts to people we love, break our marriage vows, be too harsh with our children and so on. But temptation also speaks to us about social issues—ways we relate to our world, our brothers and sisters near and far.

Temptation is also present in our ideas about what it means to be a faithful Christian. Jesus was tempted to be “successful”, but he turned away from the lure of success to preach good news to the poor, release to captives, to help the bruised and wounded, to cleanse lepers, and heal the blind.

In this world, forces that benefit from human misery and reap profits from human poverty will bring powerful opposition to those activities. And that's what happened to Jesus. He was powerfully opposed immediately.

Friends, that should give us serious food for thought. Perhaps opposition is SUPPOSED to be experienced by people of faith. Are we, have we, ever been faced with opposition in our ministries? Churches that don't extend themselves in addressing human need seldom, if ever, face opposition. If temptations offer us comfort, renown and power, and RESISTING those temptations leads to powerful opposition, how faithful are WE? As individuals? As the church of Jesus Christ? These are good questions for us to consider during this time of Lent—which is meant to be a time of wilderness wandering. During Lent we consider our sin, and we consider our mortality. Both of these have the potential to provide us with a fresh perspective on our lives.

Jesus survived his test in the desert. He resisted temptation by remembering Scripture, and by refusing to usurp the role of God our Creator. He refused to use

the power of God's Spirit to avoid the pain of a life of service. He did not use God to claim anything for himself. And it was this suffering, serving, dying Jesus whom God vindicated by raising him from death.

One final lesson comes to us this morning. Resisting temptation isn't a "one-time-only" kind of deal. Jesus' temptations didn't end in the desert. He was tested again and again. "Avoid the cross, surely there's another way," said his friend Simon Peter. Jesus' reply, "Get behind me, Satan!" suggests he'd heard that voice already, and knew it wasn't God's. Jesus faced agonies of temptation as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane right before his betrayal and arrest.

Temptation is, in many ways, our constant companion in life. God has the power to help us resist. I cherish the prayer Jesus taught us because I need to pray those lines every day: *Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* I sin. I need to forgive and be forgiven. And, dear God of all, I am tempted. Temptation is powerful and persistent. We need to pray with all our hearts: *Lead us not into temptation, O Lord. Deliver us from evil.* AMEN. Amen.