

Dealing With Temptation Luke 4:1-13

I want to speak to you today about temptation. The very word conjures up a variety of images – some serious – some silly! But I assure you, temptation is a serious matter. Many a life has been wrecked on the shoals of some sad temptation. In our gospel lesson, we see Jesus dealing with temptation. But before we look at the gospel, let's listen to the Greeks. You see, the Greeks had a story about temptation. Have you heard it?

The war was over. The Greeks had won. The city of Troy had fallen through the stratagem of Odysseus. It was he, after all, who had suggested the Trojan horse, and he who had led the men, hidden in its bowels, to attack the city of Troy at night and thus to overthrow it after many long years of siege.

Setting sail for Greece with his followers in tow, Odysseus began what would become a ten-year odyssey of attempting to return to his wife, his home, and his throne in Ithaca. What should have been a short journey was made unbearably long by Poseidon – god of the oceans – who took revenge on Odysseus when Odysseus and his men blinded Poseidon's son, the cyclopes Polyphemus. In retribution for that act, Poseidon unleashed ferocious storms and winds that delayed Odysseus and his men from reaching their desired homes.

Along the way of his perilous odyssey, Odysseus sailed near the small islands of *Sirenum Scopuli*. Those were the islands of the Sirens, those dangerous creatures who, by their siren songs, lured sailors to crash upon their rocky shores. Forewarned by the goddess Circe of the Sirens seductive wiles, Odysseus had his sailors plug their ears with bee's wax as he had himself lashed to the mast of his sailing vessel, where he commanded his sailors to leave him until they had safely sailed by. Hearing the Siren's tempting songs, Odysseus begged to be released, but his crew left him bound while they sailed to their safety. And so, Odysseus defeated the tempting Sirens and their siren-songs through the use of will and force, and thus he continued on his journey home.

It is a myth, of course, but it is absolutely true! The world is full of Sirens tempting us from our course – or better yet, from God's chosen course for us – Sirens who would wreck us on the rocky shoals of sin or on the shabby shores of mediocre living. And Satan is the Siren of Judeo-Christian tradition – the Siren who is ever tempting us to abandon God's good will in order to settle for some shore short of God's good goal for our good living.

Now before you shut me down because I'm speaking of the Devil, let me say this: Satan is real. Yes, some people believe in a personal Devil – a being of extreme evil – while others believe Satan is the personification of all the evil that exists in our world. Whatever you believe, you cannot give an accurate accounting of human history without acknowledging the reality of Satan, the Tempter, the one who stand always in opposition to the good and to our God.

Now in our text we see this Satan tempting Jesus in three ways – three ways that are common to us all. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,” the scripture says, “but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” (Heb. 4:15) And so, just as he appeals to us, Satan appealed to Jesus’ physical, psychological, and spiritual appetites, enticing him to gratify them in ways that fell short of God’s goal for his living.

In the first temptation, Satan sang a siren-song appealing to Jesus’ physical appetites. You see, after Jesus’ baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to get guidance from God. And during his time there, he fasted 40 days and 40 nights and became famished as a consequence. So, Satan appeared to Jesus and said, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” (Lk. 4:3) You see, it was an appeal to Jesus’ physical appetite.

Now it’s important to remember that our physical appetites are good and God given. Too often in history, Christians have condemned physical appetites as evil. That’s simply not the case. Our appetites for food, and drink, and touch, and passion are good gifts from a good God. Without them we would die of starvation, or dehydration, or our race would simply cease to be. But following our physical appetites can sometimes lead us away from God’s course or cause us to settle for some destination short of the one God has chosen. The gratification of our physical appetites, though vitally important, should never be our ultimate goal. So, Jesus turned aside this temptation by saying, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” (Lk. 4:4)

Defeated in his appeal to Jesus’ physical appetites, Satan sang a second siren-song appealing to Jesus’ psychological or ego appetites – his appetites for power and prestige. “Then the devil led (Jesus) up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’” (Lk 4:5-6)

Like physical appetites, our psychological or ego appetites are also given to us by God so we can live healthy and happy lives. In fact, any well-trained counselor can describe the devastating effects that a low self-esteem or fragile psychology can have on a human life. Indeed, many of life’s sins, sorrows and errors stem from a weak ego or a frail psychology. And if Jesus had suffered from such then he might well have danced to Satan’s siren-song appealing to his ego. But he didn’t!

Like following our physical appetites, following our psychological or ego appetites can sometimes lead us from God’s course or cause us to settle for some destination short of the one God has chosen. No, though vitally important for healthy living, the gratification of our psychological appetites should never be our ultimate goal. And the satisfaction of our ego should never be the final destination of our living. We were made for something more and something better. So, Jesus turned aside this temptation, too, saying, “Listen, Satan, it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” (See Lk. 4:8)

Defeated now, both in his appeal to Jesus' physical and psychological appetites, Satan sang one more siren-song, appealing this time to Jesus' religious or spiritual appetites. "Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"" (Lk. 4:9-11)¹

In this way, Satan tempted Jesus to misuse his religion – perhaps for selfish purposes. You see, at that time there was an expectation among the Jews that the Messiah would appear among them in some spectacular fashion. Leaping from the pinnacle of the temple would certainly be spectacular. It would draw quite the crowd and garner great acclaim. And being borne up by God's good hand would prove to all, wouldn't it, that Jesus was the true Messiah?

But who would Jesus do this for? For God? For the people? Or for himself? Would he do it to prove his identity or would he do it to gratify his own ego once again by making a celebrity appearance and dazzling the adoring crowds with his magical behavior? No! This wasn't God's way. And Jesus knew it. So, he refused to use his religion for personal gain or private advantage. Instead, he said, "Satan, it is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (Lk. 4:12)

And so, in each of these instances, Jesus defeated temptation and showed us the best way to do so. And the best way is not the way of Odysseus. We do not best defeat temptation by strapping ourselves to the mast. We do not best defeat enticement through the exercise of willpower or force. Instead, we best defeat the siren-songs of temptation by listening to a sweeter tune.

You see, the Greeks not only told the tale of Odysseus, but they also told the tale of Orpheus. Orpheus was the sweetest singer in all of Greek mythology. When Jason and the Argonauts set sail in search of the Golden Fleece, they took Orpheus with them on the journey because the centaur Chiron told Jason that they would never get past the Sirens without him. And so, it happened, when the Argonauts sailed near the Siren

¹As an aside, in Matthew's gospel this temptation is listed as the 2nd in the series of temptations while Luke lists it as the 3rd. Some argue that Matthew wrote chronologically while Luke wrote thematically, i.e. arranging the events in a thematic, rather than a chronological order, as if that makes a difference. But it seems more likely that each wrote a chronological account as they understood the events to have occurred. Or better yet, each ordered the events as they saw fit to best serve the truths they were trying to convey. While these differences shouldn't diminish our trust in the bible as a revelation of God's saving work, they should caution us against any rigid reading of scripture – as if the bible is a step-by-step instruction manual that must be followed in some literal, legalistic, or wooden way. It's not. The bible is a record of revelation. God revealed Godself to various people who then did their best, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, to record what they saw, what they heard, and what the revelation meant to them. So, Matthew and Luke each ordered the events as they understood them, in their own ways and for their own purposes, to best communicate what they knew to be true about Jesus Christ.

islands, Orpheus drew his lyre and played music so sweet that Jason and the Argonauts listened to him instead of them, and thus they sailed safely by.

Like the ancient Jason, Jesus was sailing to the song of a different singer. He was sailing to his Father's song, so he turned a deaf ear to Satan and his siren-songs of temptation. He was so enchanted by God's better music that he didn't turn aside when he heard Satan singing these various tunes:

- "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread," Satan sang. But Jesus heard a sweeter song...his Father's song...and said, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Lk. 4:3-4, Mt. 4:4)
- "To you I will give the glory and the authority of all the earth's kingdoms if only you will worship me," Satan sang. But Jesus heard a sweeter song...his Father's song...and said, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" (Lk. 4:5-7)
- "If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down from the Temple's highest point, gather a crowd and gain acclaim," Satan sang. But Jesus heard a sweeter song...his Father's song...and said, "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (Lk. 4:9-11)²

You see, Jesus followed an Orphean strategy rather than an Odyssean strategy for dealing with temptation. He didn't strap himself to the mast of God's will. He fell in love with a sweeter song – his Father's song – and then he sailed toward its shore. It's a strategy that commends itself to us today.

My friends, this Sunday is the first Sunday of Lent. During Lent we follow Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, learning how best to be his disciples as we journey with him on the way. Today he defeats temptation by dancing to his Father's tune, and he calls us to do the same. May each of us pray for fresh grace this Lenten season so we might once again fall so in love with our Father's music that we will dance with Jesus in loving loyalty to the Father always, and thus defeat temptation and distraction all along life's way. Short of that, let's strap ourselves to the mast, plug our ears, and do our best; Lent, and the spiritual life in general, will be a rough journey on bumpy seas if that's the way we choose to deal with temptation! Amen.

² It's interesting that Jesus defeated each temptation by quoting from the book of Deuteronomy. The word "Deuteronomy" means "a repetition of the Law." The Law was first given at the beginning of the Jewish Exodus, but the people of God failed to follow God faithfully to the Promised Land as commanded and had to spend 40 years wandering in the wilderness as a consequence. Finally, at the end of that period, and just prior to their entrance into Canaan, Moses gathered the people to recite their history, reissue the law, and call them once again to faithful obedience. By quoting Deuteronomy, Jesus identified himself with faithful Israel, no longer defeated by temptation, but victorious and dancing to the Father's tune!