

Shallow victories

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the nine o'clock service, February 21, 2010: The First Sunday in Lent.
Based on Luke 4:1-13.*

Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit," the scripture tells us. He had just been baptized, and everything was fine. But as we know life often to be, almost immediately, things took a dark turn: he met the devil in the wilderness. Although we make a big deal out of this encounter because it is the one written about, my guess is it wasn't his first; hardly anyone, even Jesus, lives to be 30 years old without having more than a few contacts with the devil.

I am not exactly sure what I mean when I refer to the "devil." There is no person associated with it for me, no personified presence that comes to mind. Well, not exactly—though to be sure, I have known some folks that seemed to be close to what I think the devil would be. I have never heard the devil speak and I doubt that Jesus did either, but the literary device used in this story seems spot-on to me. It is a powerful account often interpreted primarily as a story about Jesus, which it unquestionably is; but even more profoundly, it seems to me that it is a story about all of us.

Jesus, of course, knew temptation; it is part of the human condition; and though there is clear relativism present in what defines some things as sinful in one time or place and not so in others, there is no doubt that every human being, who has ever lived or is yet to, was and will be tempted by some force to be selfish, greedy, lustful, etc. Jesus certainly encountered all those opportunities just as we do. The scope of this story, though, is deeper than that as it seems to go to fundamental temptations for Jesus to be other than who he was. In the wilderness, he was invited through a series of enticing visions

to embrace three personas, each of which in the end would have been dramatically contrary to his essential character.

"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus must have been tempted to turn all those stones into much needed bread. Life was hard all around, and people were hungry. There could be enough for everyone. To succumb to this temptation, though, Jesus would have had to become a materialist. Had he taken this step, the gospel of prosperity, a great temptation, and I would say heresy, of any age, and particularly ours, would have scored a significant victory. "Follow me, and you will have all you want," could have become the message. But he knew that real hunger is more than physical and that to satiate physical hunger at the expense of spiritual nourishment would be a partial cure that would lead to trouble. Critical as it is, bread alone will never be enough.

"To you I will give their glory and all this authority; it will all be yours." The second vision invited Jesus to reverse once and for all the exploitation of the Roman occupation. The lure of promised authority and power to realize at last the Israelite hope for a kingdom of justice was more powerful than we can even imagine. But Jesus knew himself; he knew that he was not called to be a ruler of a nation but a partner for all humankind in our struggles to be fully human.

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here." The third temptation was that he collapse into the miraculous—becoming a sort of pre-modern "Bewitched." Some of

you are old enough to remember her, moving things around with just the twitch of her nose. Jesus knew to do that would make a mockery of the Incarnation of God. My guess is that this was probably the easiest of the three to withstand: Jesus was not a magician.

In each of these moments, Jesus prevailed, remaining true to himself and to God. That faithfulness is the lesson of the story as I see it. These, I believe, are archetypal temptations that are deeply known to each of us. The particulars, of course, are as unique as each of us is, but near the core of our struggles with darkness—and each of us has some struggle with darkness—is the temptation to forget who we are. The media, the world of marketing and entertainment, tell us in a million ways that we need to be someone else, something other than what we are. The message is clear that what we are is far from what we want to be or ought to want to be. Jesus encountered a similar campaign: “Be all that you can be, Jesus; get what you want right now; just do it; now is the time.” Most of these temptations had a very sane basis, a position that could be well argued. That is what made them so tempting. Equally true, many of the paths we consider are just as cleverly sophisticated, just as attractively packaged; and it is only long after the fact that we learn what a bad turn we have made.

The season of Lent stops us each year, asking us to consider how well our lives are aligned. Through quiet reflection and self-examination, we are invited to ask hard questions about the state of our lives. In what ways have we moved away from our core values? In what ways have we forgotten what is truly and ultimately important to us? In what ways have we sold out?

It is serious business, and sometimes the answers are very scary. But living a life that is not true to who we are, to who it is

that we have been and are being called to be, is even scarier. When for fear of being too heavy or off-putting, we attempt to lessen the significance of what Lent asks, we miss an important opportunity, a chance to refocus, to find our center again, to move away from darkness back into the light. Sadly, conversations like this in the context of church are complicated and often avoided because they bear the burden of years of bad theology and attempted mind control by threatened clerics. When the church asks us to get serious in our life-review, the temptation is to dissolve into a guilt fest rather than to engage in a productive, mature period of reassessment and redirection. Guilt is not the answer even when there is abundant guilt to go around. As a church, not this parish particularly but the church—forgive me if this sounds terribly cynical—we spend way too much time talking about sins, real and imagined, that amount to very little and often say more about our prurience than our devotion, and spend far too little time on big questions about the deep issues that gnaw at our souls.

I don't have the answers; I don't even have all the questions. But I see people, and indeed often see myself among them, who are desperately wanting more—more meaning, more peace, more God in our lives. What I believe, my friends, is that we can trust this journey; we can face the wilderness of our own temptations and come out alive and stronger for it. What lurks there in our darkness will not prevail; what it knows or thinks it knows about us is not our entire story. But unless we are willing to face the false claims that tempt us, we are destined to build bigger and bigger fences around them, preserving the very things we know not to be truest about us, the things from which we most desire to be released.

Although there are many important facts about us—some good and some not so good—

one truth that trumps all others is this fact: we are the beloved of God. When we are living lives that square with who God has created us to be, we are the beloved of God; when we have so thoroughly missed the mark that we are hardly recognizable even to ourselves, we are the beloved of God.

In a flourish of ashes and long lines to receive them, Lent has arrived again. And this year as always, we do not need to be fearful of

the church's invitation to this annual journey. There is no darkness so dark as to extinguish the fact that we are loved of God; our willingness to name and face our temptations shines the very light of God upon them and shows us the way back to God. It's Lent, friends, and it's time to come home again.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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