

"Forty Days and Forty Nights,"

6 March 2005

Bible passage: **Luke 4: 1-2, 3b, 5,**

"Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wild For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up he was hungry. ..."

(The first temptation) "Command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread..."

(The second temptation—all the kingdoms of the earth on display before him) "They're yours in all their splendor to serve your pleasure...."

(The third temptation—from atop the Temple in Jerusalem) "If you are God's Son, jump..."

I don't know if any of you remember the comedian Flip Wilson, or not, but I used to think that his routines were pretty funny. There was one I especially liked, and that was when he dressed up like Geraldine, a very self-assured and outspoken woman. When Geraldine's husband complained about a dress she had bought, she exclaimed, "The Devil made me do it! I said 'Devil, stop it! Please! Then he made me try it on!...Made me sign your name to a check!" "The Devil made me do it!" was a catch phrase that became popular at the time.

To don't think I've ever read this particular Bible passage without thinking of that Flip Wilson/Geraldine saying. At least, on the surface, it appears that Jesus is facing a variety of tempting alternatives, and he could easily succumb to them, saying, "The Devil made me do it." Even though it's a funny line, using that line sort of absolves us from any responsibility in decisions that move us in directions that might be less than wholesome. It's just an excuse that means we have elected not to exert any self-discipline or self-control in one matter or another.

In today's Bible passage, the story is of a struggle that Jesus is going through. We're told that this soul-searching is happening just after he was baptized, and that seems to have special significance in this story. The way I understand it is that Jesus had come to see the way in which God was leading him, and he had to weigh this newfound sense of direction against some of the temptations that the world set before him.

Clearly, this is an inner struggle. I don't really believe in a devil or anything we refer to as Satan. That's the Bible's way of signifying something that's a trial or temptation for us. Because of the limitations of language, those terms are like icons on a computer screen. They're the shortcut way of representing that which is something else, something less than

positive, less than fulfilling, less than God-like. Whenever we read the word "Devil," we might substitute the word "tempter," or "things that are tempting us," because that's really what this Bible story is all about—the various temptations that Jesus had to face, temptations that we face in many forms every day.

Now Jesus is tempted with three different things. The first is to turn the stone into bread. The end of our passage tells us that he was hungry, and here he was in the middle of a desolate place. Let me tell you, I've been in the desert area where this story is placed, and it's a dry, remote, barren landscape. There's not vegetation of any kind, and food would not be readily available. So the temptation was for Jesus to do something to create food for himself. To acquiesce would be to give in to material gain for his own benefit.

The second temptation is about compromising himself in exchange for power. He's tempted with all the kingdoms of the world, and he could be the ruler. All he has to do is opt into the power struggle, and he could find the means to conquer and control the kingdoms. In essence, Jesus is being tempted to compromise his integrity and his character to the standards of the world, instead of holding true to the principles by which God could lead his life.

The third temptation is to throw himself from the top of the Temple in Jerusalem, thus demonstrating the power to save himself. In other words, he could be tempted to impress others through his charisma. He could become a celebrity, or a charlatan. With that kind of thing, he could become that day's version of American idol. However, Jesus was able to understand that that kind of celebrity status is fleeting. It doesn't endure, and what he felt called to was something that was more lasting and meaningful.

So, you may be wondering, after fleshing all that out, what does that have to do with us? Clearly, you and I face a myriad of temptations every single day. For most of us, it's not about the tempting influence of power over others. We'll leave that to the politicians. Usually, our temptations don't have anything to do with fame and fortune, because that's not likely to come to any of us. After all, we're just plain, ordinary folks, living ordinary, routine lives.

*Nonetheless, you and I make decisions every day—some of them major, and some not so important. And we have choices. I think Jesus was really struggling with the direction his life was to take. To use some pastor-type terminology, "he was experiencing God's call on his life." He's been changed by a personal connection with God. Marcus Borg, in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, refers to Jesus as a "spirit person," and by that he means "a person to whom the sacred is an experiential reality."*

However, we need to realize that having a close encounter with God does not mean that we are home free and totally exempt from anything that would move us in other directions. Even when our faith is real and powerful in our lives, we wrestle, or at least I do. I truly believe that Jesus was human just like you and me, and that his life on this earth wasn't all that different from ours. Oh, sure, he lived in another time and in a very different culture, but as a human being, he had many life challenges to respond to. His faith informed the choices he made, and the same thing can be true for us. It still means that we face challenging alternatives.

Sometimes, we have major decisions to make, like the direction our lives will take. In the big picture of things, we have to choose whether we want our lives to count for good or for ill. Do we want to live in such a way that we make a positive contribution to our world, or do we want to focus solely on acquiring all the good things in life? I suppose that those two are not mutually exclusive, but sometimes they require different means of accomplishing those purposes. One of the main temptations most of us deal with on a daily basis is the desire for material things. We get caught up sometimes with wanting a bigger house or a more important job, or a fancy car, or to take extravagant vacations. We think that just a little more money will satisfy us and make life worthwhile.

However, it doesn't usually work out that way. Do you remember the old song that kept repeating the words, "Is that all there is?" Well, there are times when we've got all we need and more, that we discover that we're not really satisfied. We experience emptiness inside, and ask ourselves, "Is that all there is?" I really think that's the point that Jesus is trying to make with being tempted to changed stone into bread. In reality, material things are stone-cold and their worth is fleeting.

There are other kinds of temptations that face many of us regularly. Those struggling with recovery from substance abuse know the daily effort it takes to turn away from drugs or alcohol, and the way so many

succeed in their recovery is through God's presence in their lives.

Every day we face temptations that could take us one way or the other. Ask any small business owner who's struggling to make a go of things, and we discover some of the difficulties and the temptation to be unethical in order to succeed. Ask any teenager who wants desperately to be accepted by his or her peers. Ask them about the temptation to impress other people to win their approval; ask about the things they do—and we all have done—to fit in. Even as adults, most of us crave that acceptance, sometimes to the point of compromising our integrity, of sacrificing our core values. Those are struggles that most of us face most of the time.

One of the major things that tempts me, and I would guess some of you, is the tendency to take things into my own hands. I feel like I'm a pretty in-charge person, and I can handle what comes my way. Anyway, most of us would be a bit reluctant to let others think that we're not competent or capable of handling things on our own. We like to be in control, and we like things to work out the way we want. In the process of trying to prove to others that we've got it all together, we move God out of central place in our lives. Our need to control and be in charge takes over. Maybe we just don't really trust God to do it our way, or we're not sure we really want to know what God has in mind. I suspect that control needs are temptations that plague many of us.

Well, I could go on and on listing the various types of things that tempt us and move us away from God, but there's no point in doing that. The reality is that, with God, we have what it takes to choose the more positive direction for our lives every single moment of every day.

We are right in the middle of the period of time prior to Easter that the church calls Lent, and it's a time of 40+ days when we are asked to be more introspective, examining our lives. It's a time when we can take a good look at our spirituality and reflect on the choices we are making. Is God a part of them? Are we able to turn in more positive directions every day because God's love guides us? Is everything we do and say done in love? Are we putting our trust in God, or in ourselves?

No matter what we discover in this time, it's a good time for all of us to reflect on our relationship with God, and spend the time with God that will enrich and fill our lives with goodness and love.

Closing:

Franklin P. Jones was quoted as saying, "Nothing makes it easier to resist temptation than a proper bringing-up, a sound set of values—and witnesses." That's all true, but the best way I know for us to turn away from life-depleting temptations is to have God's loving guidance leading our steps. Let's give it a try. OK?

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.