

“THE THREE ‘P’s of TEMPTATION”

Psalm 91; Luke 4:1-13

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Every now and then when I am leading a small group, I will ask the participants to share something about themselves that nobody in the group knows. In a group of strangers, the assignment is easy. But if it is a group of people who know each other fairly well, the task is more challenging. Did you know that I used to be a furniture salesperson? How many knew that? When I was in seminary at Boston University, there was a man who owned two furniture stores in Cambridge, Mass. He hired my seminary roommate to work at one of his stores on Saturdays. When he needed a second person, my roommate told me about the opening, and I was hired. Every Saturday I would go to Harvard Square to that small store and sell lamps, bean bag chairs, and occasionally, beds and couches to Harvard students and other grad students who lived in the area.

Was I a good salesperson? Well, my heart really wasn't in the furniture business! But I found that if people felt they really needed a lamp or a bed or a chair, it was a lot easier to make a sale than if they just walked by the store and decided to come in to kill time. The tempter in today's story is the ultimate salesperson! He knows every angle. His goal is to get the product into the hands of the potential buyer and he uses every opportunity. He is, after all, selling what we all want and need: meaning and purpose for our lives.

They say that if you stand in Harvard Square for a half hour, no matter who you are or where you are from, you will see somebody that you know! There I was in the midst of a city teeming with people, selling what a lot of people needed: furniture for their dorm rooms, apartments and houses. In contrast, Jesus was in the desert, in the wilderness where there was nobody. But the tempter found him, even there. And like a relentless salesperson, the devil begins to offer Jesus his wares.

In the Bible, the wilderness is the place of decision and contemplation. Moses spent time in the wilderness before he went to see Pharaoh and led the people out of Egypt. Elijah spent time in the wilderness before he confronted King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. John the Baptist preached in the wilderness. Jesus spent time there, too.

Most of us spend most of our lives in the wilderness. Like the people of ancient Israel, we are somewhere on the journey between Egypt and the Promised Land, between our initial commitment to faith and total allegiance to God. Jesus went to the wilderness to sort things out following his baptism and his decision to be the Messiah God was calling him to be, and the devil found him there! Sometimes we talk about being tempted “in a weak moment,” but I

believe that the devil also tempts us when things are going well, when we are on top of the world. Jesus had just seen the heavens open and heard God declare that God was pleased with Jesus. Now, following that high moment, Jesus is tempted to settle for less than the difficult path that God is calling him to walk.

We read that Jesus has been in the desert, in the wilderness, for forty days, and he has been fasting. He has had nothing to eat. In fact, the New Revised Version tells us he was “famished.” That’s good news for the tempter! Jesus has a real need, an emptiness that needs to be filled. There is nothing a salesperson likes more than someone who needs something.

So the tempter comes to Jesus and suggests that he turn the stones into bread in order to satisfy his hunger. Remember that Jesus is in the wilderness where there is very little water and few plants. But there is an abundance of stones. What a deal, implies the tempter. I know you are hungry. A bit of bread would be nice. Here are plenty of stones that can be transformed into bread. You will have more than enough to eat.

Sounds like a good idea. But is it worth the price? Jesus is a wise consumer. He realizes that he needs more than the tempter can provide. He knows that he cannot satisfy spiritual hunger with material possessions. He turns the tempter down with these words, “One does not live by bread alone.” Bread alone will not address the myriad of needs that Jesus is experiencing. All of us know that bread doesn’t last very long. After a few days, bread becomes moldy. Nor does bread sustain our bodies for very long. No matter how big a meal we eat, it isn’t long until we are hungry again.

I cringe when I watch some of those commercials on television. There is the company that claims not to be selling cars, but selling happiness. I have yet to buy a car that keeps me happy. Eventually, they all cost a fortune to maintain, and I can think of a lot of things I’d rather be doing than sitting in the service department of some car dealership waiting for my car to be fixed.

There’s a bumper sticker that says, “When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping!” But do those purchases really satisfy us? We all know the answer to that question. **The first ‘P’ of temptation is possessions**, the belief that if we just get a few more things, we will be happy, we will be satisfied.

Then the tempter takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem --- the highest point in the city --- and says “Throw yourself down, Jesus! You’re the Son of God. God won’t let anything happen to you!” The temptation came to Jesus, and the temptation comes to each of us, to be spectacular, larger than life. **The second ‘P’ of temptation is prestige**. We all want a little celebrity. We all think that somehow the laws of the universe don’t apply to us. When we are teenagers, we get behind the wheel of a car and believe we can go as fast as we can, and everything will be all right. When we are adults, we think we can take a few shortcuts and nobody will notice. Or we don’t take the time to do what we know we have to do. I confess, I have been known to drive along with the gas gauge on “E” and pray, “Lord, just let me get to the next gas station.” Why should I expect God to take care of something I should have had enough sense to take care of myself? Cars don’t run on prayers; they run on gasoline!

Jesus resists the temptation to be spectacular, to pretend that he is larger than life. But the tempter, being a good salesperson, is not through. He has another product to offer: authority and power. Just step right over here, Jesus. Have I got a deal for you! Just say the word, and I’ll give you all the kingdoms of this world. Just worship me, and it’s a done deal. **The third ‘P’ of temptation is power**. Don’t we all want more control over the direction of our lives and more influence over what happens in the future? Sometimes we feel so powerless, helpless,

impotent. We receive a medical diagnosis that we didn't expect, and we are powerless to change it. We see the devastation in Haiti, and we feel powerless to help. We see life unraveling in relationship after relationship. We desperately want things to be different, but we somehow lack the power to fix what is broken. In these moments, any offer of power is welcome, indeed. We are tempted to turn to the quick fix, to worship something or someone less than God. Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder got into a debate with someone at a church meeting. Yoder had been arguing for "pacifism," while the other man was countering with his "just war" theory. Finally the man said, "Well, although we disagree, at least we are both trying to worship the same God. Right?"

Yoder replied quietly, "I don't think we are."

We cannot have it both ways. If we are going to follow Jesus, then we must resist **the three 'P's of temptation: possessions, prestige and power**. We are always being tempted to become someone we were not meant to be. When I taught the Conference United Methodist Women's Mission study, we talked about identity theft. Several women shared how their Social Security number, or credit card information or e-mail account password had gotten into the wrong hands and caused major problems in their lives. When we are baptized, we are named and claimed as beloved children of God. Nothing can take that identity away.

There may be times when we are tempted to forget who we are. There will be times of sadness, times of spiritual and physical hunger. There will be times of doubt. There will be moments of real need, when our bodies are tired and our spirits are famished. There will be times when it seems that God has forgotten us, and we need to take desperate measures to get God's attention. There might be moments when we are tempted to forget who we are.

When we are tempted, God calls us to remain steadfast, for as someone writes, "*the stakes are high.*" "*If Christ is our king,*" says Professor Alice Camille, in an article published in the *US Catholic*, "*The stakes are high. The usual controlling bodies ---media, public opinion, the quest for security, the lifestyle of acquisitions --- have no sovereignty over us. The authority of Christ is not just another voice; it is the only voice to which we need to respond. And Christianity is not just more homework, a dungeon-like oppression to suffer; it is the only authority that liberates those who subject themselves to it. Not to embrace Christ the King is to continue to bow before the countless sovereigns of the world and to light the sacrifices at too many altars. Not to listen to Christ is to face the schizophrenia of voices beckoning, demanding, cajoling our obedience, all the while spinning their web of half-truths.*" (1)

How do we resist the temptation to settle for less than God through the acquisition of possessions, the lure of prestige, the thirst for power? We have Christ as our example, who was "***in every respect tempted as we are, yet without sin.***" (Hebrews 4:14) Focusing our minds and hearts on Christ this Lenten season can help us resist the tempter. I remind you of the words of St. Patrick's Breastplate that are the focus of our Lenten devotional booklets: "*Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ be after me, Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ at my right hand, Christ at my left, Christ in every eye that sees me. Christ in every ear that hears me.*" (2)

Yes, Christ is with us, every step of the way. Though the tempter is strong, God is stronger. God is with us in every situation we face in life. God can help us resist temptation. When we stumble and fall short, God is still there, ready to pick us up, forgive us and offer us help and hope.

Be assured that the tempter is always lurking! At the end of the story, the Bible tells us that after the tempter had tried everything he could think of, he backed off until "*an opportune*

time.” Even Jesus never got beyond temptation. Do you think temptation will ever leave you? Just as Jesus was tempted to be someone he was not meant to be, so the same temptation comes to us. In those moments, we need to remember who we are. We are children of God. God doesn’t want us to settle for the possessions, prestige and power that the tempter is trying to sell. God doesn’t want us to settle for anything less than God’s mercy, God’s love and God’s strength. Jesus said “no” to the tempter and “yes” to God. May we follow his example this day and every day. Amen.

Prayer: Generous God, you name us your beloved children and claim us as your very own. You nurture our spirits and provide for our souls. Forgive us when we look elsewhere for fulfillment, identity, or happiness. Let us not be lured by the possessions, prestige, and power that do not satisfy. Instead, help us put our trust in you. Remind us again, loving God, that you provide us with our daily bread and the strength we need to face each day. Amen.

Note:

1. Camille, Alice. “Long Live the King,” *US Catholic*, November, 2000., p. 24