

Luke 4:1-13 (NRSV)

The Temptation of Jesus
(Mt 4.1—11; Mk 1.12—13)

4 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”⁴ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’ ”

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.⁶ 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.⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”⁸ Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’ ”

⁹ 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,¹⁰ for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

¹¹ and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

¹² Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Darkest Before the Dawn

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Luke 4:1-13*

At the beginning of his ministry, before he began his preaching and teaching, Jesus went into the wilderness for prayer and fasting. It was his spiritual preparation for all that was to follow. One gathers that this retreat in the wilderness was a necessary preparation for the difficult events of the rest of his life.

There are days that I yearn to go on retreat like that, to take forty days of peace and quiet and prayer. Imagine, forty days without the demands that our lives put on us. No work. No family obligations. No schoolwork. Just peace and quiet.

However, this may be one of those be-careful-what-you-ask-for things. Jesus went on a forty day retreat, and rather than peace and quiet, Jesus met Satan in the desert. There, for forty days he prayed and fasted, but during the whole time, he was tempted by the devil. The devil didn't leave him alone for a single moment. Hardly a picture of tranquility.

At the end of forty days, after he had finished his retreat, Jesus was famished and more than a little worn-out. But he had made it. He had not fallen prey to the devil. But the devil wasn't done with him. The devil now brought out every weapon in his arsenal. Jesus was famished and the devil tempted him to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. Failing there, the devil then promised dominion over all earthly realms and powers and principalities. And failing there, the devil tempted him with immortality. Failing there, the devil left him until later in the story.

It is a familiar passage, yet it remains a riveting story.

This morning I would like to tell you another story, less familiar, but which I hope you will find interesting, too.

A long time ago, in a far away land, there was a young prince who lived within the walled city of the palace grounds. In the walled city every difficult thing in life was removed, and the prince saw only beauty and delight. Older people were removed, so he saw no one aging. Sick people were removed, so he saw no illness. Poor people were disallowed, so he saw no poverty. Garbage and waste were quickly taken away, so he saw nor smelled anything rotting. And he never knew that anyone died. The prince's father was intent that the prince would never encounter anything troubling or sad in his life, for he wanted the prince to become attached to the things of the world. The prince's father had been told that his son would take up spiritual pursuits. His father knew that if the prince delighted in the things of the world, he would not follow a spiritual path.

But one day, as luck would have it, the prince managed to find his way outside the walled city. For the first time he saw life in all its fullness and variety and trouble. He saw a person who was wretchedly ill. He saw another bent over with age. And for the first time, he saw the body of a dead person. Suddenly the prince understood that life, including his own, was susceptible to sickness, old age and death. He grasped that worldly is transitory and that no wealth, luxury or comfort could prevent that fact.

On that day the prince saw one person, and only one, who was serene in the face of all the trouble. He was a monk. Immediately, the prince left his life of ease and took on the robes of self-denial, the opposite of the life he had known. Ultimately, the prince became committed to nearly starving himself in order to transcend attachment to earthly things. The prince became a mere skeleton and very weak, but he still did not make spiritual progress.

Early on the full moon day of April the now emaciated prince sat beneath a tree near the a big village. Around the same time the daughter of a rich man from the village, was making preparations to give an offering to the tree-spirit of the tree. She had sent her maid ahead to tidy up the area around the spread of the holy tree, but at the sight of the starving man seated beneath the tree the maid thought the deity had made himself visible to receive their offering in person. She ran back in great excitement to inform her mistress. The young went to the tree and gave the prince nourishment in the form of a rice-milk gruel. The prince then regained his strength and help.

The prince began to eat the food beneath the shadow of the tree. He sat in a meditative mood underneath the tree from early morning to sunset, with a fiery determination and an iron resolve: "I will not get up from this seat till I get full illumination." He plunged himself into deep meditation.

The devil knew that if the prince succeeded here he would become free from him and all worldly attachments. The devil decided to lure the prince away from his quest. He beseeched the Prince to follow his duties of householder and ruler and to abandon the quest for liberation from the material world. It is not proper for a king to renounce the world that he rules. The best life, the devil claimed, is to "subdue the world both with arrows and with sacrifices, and from the world obtain the world of fortune." The devil threatened the Prince with his bow and arrow stating that he spares those who indulge in carnal pleasures, but shoots those who do not. But even when the arrow was shot, the prince did not move. After failing to lead the prince to the path of sensual gratification the devil utilized fear in his attempt to make him run away from the search for liberation. The devil gathered his fiendish minions from the deepest pits to wage war with the prince. The devil and his minions assaulted the prince with, conceit, arrogance, and pride. They tried to make him doubt that his spiritual life made any sense. They tried to entice him to sorcery. The sent beautiful naked women before him and tempted him with lust. They tried to fill him with feelings of hatred, anger, resentment, revulsion, dissatisfaction, aversion, annoyance, and disappointment. When all this failed, the devil, in one last desperate attempt, unleashed every weapon at once. The weather became turbulent, the power of Chaos mirrored the behavior of the demons and the turmoil of the conflict.

But when the dust cleared, the prince's resolve had withstood it all. His face shone with divine splendor and effulgence. His heart was filled with profound mercy and compassion. He wanted to share what he had with humanity. He traveled all over the land and preached and taught.

Does anyone recognize this story?

So, the story of the Buddha's temptation and enlightenment. You might ask, why is our minister telling us a story about the Buddha in his sermon? Let me answer that question with another, much briefer story. Mahatma Gandhi was a Hindu, you probably know. But he was also very taken by Jesus and the Christian Gospels. He frequently read the Bible. Indeed, Gandhi was often know to offer that he was a better Christian than many who called themselves

Christians. Some would then press him and say, “Well, Gandhi, does that mean you are a Christian?” And he would answer enigmatically. He would say, I am a Christian in every way except confessing Christ as Lord.” What Gandhi meant was that he valued Jesus and the tenets of the Christian faith, but that he remained a Hindu. So one answer, to my story this morning is that we as Christians can learn many valuable things from other religious traditions. I expect that those who don’t think so will be rather surprised when they get to heaven and see Jesus, the Buddha and Gandhi wrapped deep in conversation.

So that’s one answer. We can learn from others. But this morning I have an even more important reason. For us Christians, because in one fashion or another we see Jesus as God, as the third person of the trinity, or Lord, or something like that, we tend to think his experience has little in common with ours. At least speaking for myself, I have most often thought of the devil’s temptation of Jesus as a story to show how incredibly superhuman Jesus was. He was so superhuman that he could resist the wiles of Satan.

But what if the story of Jesus’ temptation were an invitation, not just a sign that he was the Son of God? Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to a similar question. He noted that Christians in Germany had come to believe that the commands of the Sermon on the Mount—love your enemy, forgive one another, and so on—weren’t really meant for us to follow. Christians, Bonhoeffer observed, had concluded that these commands were there to show us how sinful we are because we could never follow them. They weren’t meant to be invitations to a way of life; they were simply there to show us how depraved we are that only through Jesus can we be forgiven and saved. Bonhoeffer said Bologna and wrote a lovely book called *Life Together* in which catalogued his attempt to build a community built around Jesus’ commandments in the sermon on the mount, a community that did it successfully until the Gestapo shut it down.

So, I’ve told you the story of the Buddha for two reasons. The first for us to see that this temptation by the wiles of the world is not limited to Christianity. It is a very important theme in other religious traditions. Second, Buddhism is very clear that one is not so much to worship the Buddha as to follow what he did. That is, in a way that sometimes Christianity obscures, people are instructed that they should do what their founder did, and that they will experience the same things their founder did in the process.

A close reading of the Gospels makes it clear that Jesus invited his disciples to drink the cup he drank and be baptized with his baptism. He invited them into the a way of life based on the way he lived his life. As his disciples in this generation, this same invitation is offered to us. And it comes with a warning label. And that label says this: when you decide to take the Gospel seriously. When you decide to try to live in the way that Christ or the Buddha calls us to. When in Gandhi’s terms we decide to try to be at least as good a Christian as he was, know first that it is a spiritual path. We may not get forty days by ourselves in the desert, but we need time for prayer and meditation. We need time out from the flurry, busyness and concerns of our daily lives.

But then comes the kicker on the warning label, which is captured in these two images that share much in common. One is of Jesus in the wilderness, the other of the Buddha under the Bodi tree. As you enter into this spiritual space, as you begin to see through the illusions of the world’s offerings, as you begin to see the things in life that hold you back and you begin to imagine letting go of them, before the bliss, before the joy, before the serenity, will come the devil. Whether you put it in religious terms, or psychological ones, when you begin to release

yourself from that inner self that lusts after the passions and powers and promises of the world's store, that inner self will fight all the harder to win you over. And the reason is obvious. For should you succeed in overthrowing the lures of the world, you have rung the death-knell for the grasping and lusting part of yourself. And so it fights for its very life. Like the devil in Jesus' temptation or Mara in the Buddha's, it will throw the kitchen sink at you, trying desperately to hold onto you or win you back.

We have just begun, as of last Wednesday, the forty days and nights of Lent. And Jesus invites us into the desert with him, for a time of prayer and meditation. He invites us to free ourselves from those things that hold us in bondage. He invites us to be set free. But he knows that there, where he has invited us, for every glimpse of a new future we see, we will also face our demons. And the demons will be strong and persuasive and crafty in their attempt to win us over. Jesus wants us to know this so that we are not so surprised. And he also wants us to know that at the moment that the demons are fighting the hardest we are on the brink of freedom. As the old saying goes, it is darkest just before the dawn. Amen.