

Sermon for 2-21-10

Three Temptations

Luke 4:1-13

Human beings are spiritual beings. In our spiritual life, there are always temptations. Martin Luther once said, "My temptations have been my master in divinity." The Bible introduces temptation as the human being's fundamental spiritual issue in Genesis 3. The story of "The Fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" is the first, the oldest, and one of the most poignant stories in the Bible. This story of temptation explains why human beings were fallen from life in paradise to a mortal life. It is a fact that in human life there is a power of evil which tempts humans to fall. Therefore, temptation should not be treated lightly in human life. Rather, temptation is one of the big issues in Christian spiritual life. Temptation was not an exception, even for Jesus, the Son of God. And we must all consider temptation seriously during this season of Lent.

Today's scripture, Luke 4, marks an introduction of Jesus' ministry on earth. He started his ministry with temptation. After he heard the voice from heaven, "You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am pleased," at His baptism, he went into the desert and spent forty days and nights in fasting. There, he was tempted by Satan. This passage has been a foundation for the tradition of Christian fasting and experience of denial experience during Lent. Lent is a good time for Christians to imitate the life of Jesus, and to participate in Jesus' experience of suffering and temptation.

Have you ever had a fasting experience? Wesley noted that for Christians, fasting is one of means to the grace of God. What's the longest time you've ever gone without eating? What do you remember about that? What's the first thing you ate when you ended your fast? About fifteen years ago, during Lent, I had an experience of twenty-one days of fasting. I had drunk water or juice, but no food for twenty-one days. I could do normal activities during the twenty-one day fast, like mowing the lawn, playing ping-pong, reading, praying, doing Bible study, preaching, and ordinary activities in the church.

Of course, the biggest temptation during the fast was eating! Every item in the grocery store looked delicious. Actually, I tested by myself for how long I can be patient and resist my temptation. One evening, I cooked dinner for Sun, and sat beside her and watched her eat, since Sun was not fasting. If I am conscious about my temptation, I can resist it. But, most temptations we fail to resist come unconsciously. After this fast, I came to believe that human beings can exist at least twenty-one days without eating, if water and spirit are available.

The forty-day fast of Jesus, the Son of Man, implies forty days as the maximum period of suffering which human beings can endure. During this period, Jesus was tempted three times by Satan. He heard three voices of Satan: "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to turn into bread," and "If you worship me, I will give you all authority and splendor in

the world,” and finally, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here at the highest point of the temple, then the angels of God will lift you up in their hands.”

The word for being tempted, in Greek, is *peirazo*. In the earliest Greek literature (Homer) it is used in the sense “make proof of.” Its main meaning is to “test, try and prove.” Soon after Jesus had heard the voice calling him the Beloved, he was led to the desert to hear those other voices. Jesus heard the devil in the desert: If you are Son of God, prove that you are Son of God, materially, intellectually and spiritually, in the way of this world.

We are constantly listening to two voices: one from the Word of God, and the other from the voices of people. Jesus heard two voices as well, one from God: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am pleased,” then Satan, challenging him, saying, “If you are Son of God, Prove it!” That was the temptation of Jesus by Satan. There are voices; one from God and the other from the people of this world. Sometimes we are confused by the two voices.

Sometimes we are deaf to the voice of God, “You are beloved my son or daughter!” Elijah was standing on the mountain to meet God. First, there came a hurricane, but God was not in the hurricane. Then, there came an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Then, followed a fire, but God was not there either. Finally, there came something very tender, called by some a soft breeze and by others a small voice. When Elijah sensed this, he covered his face because he knew that God was present. In the tenderness of God, voice was touch and touch was voice. Don’t lose the first voice, the voice of God. Affirm for yourself that you are children of God, with you God is pleased.

Unfortunately, we hear other voices, “Go out and prove that you are worth something.” This second voice is loud, full of promise, and is seductive. This voice promises us the glory and power of this world. Satan tempted Jesus on three levels; (1) the physical level with food; (2) the intellectual level, tempting him do something sensational; and 3) on the spiritual level, demanding of Jesus, “Worship me!”

Today, we hear similar voices to the voice of Satan which tempted Jesus. Satan told Jesus to prove that he was worth love by being successful, popular, and powerful. Those same voices are not unfamiliar to us. They are always there and, always, they reach into those inner places where we question our own goodness and doubt our self-worth. They suggest that you are not going to be loved without your having earned it, through determined efforts and hard work. They want you to prove to yourself and others that you are worth being loved, and they keep pushing you to do everything possible to gain acceptance. They deny loudly that love is a totally free gift.

In retrospect of his prestige past life, the life of a professor at Harvard University, Henry Nouwen confessed that he heard many voices:

“They have come to me through my parents, my friends, my teachers, and my colleagues, but, most of all, they have come and still come through the mass media that

surround me.” And they say: “Show me that you are a good boy. You had better be better than your friends! How are your grades? Be sure you can make it through school! I sure hope you are going to make it on your own! What are your connections? Are you sure you want to be friends with those people? These trophies certainly show how good a player you were! Don’t show your weakness, you’ll be used! Have you made all the arrangements for your old age? When you stop being productive, people lose interest in you! When you are dead, you are dead!”

After re-hearing the voice of God, apart from the voices of others, he resigned his prestigious position as professor at Harvard University, and went to Canada to minister to a group of severely mentally and physically handicapped people living in a group home.

There are three voices we are so accustomed to and oriented by, and which tempts us:

First, you are what you do. We are accustomed to evaluate people by what they are doing. But, a human is “being” not “doing.” I was told by my brothers, teachers, and friends to do something relevant. “Be a lawyer, doctor, teacher, engineer or CEO!” We hope for our children to have prestigious careers.

Second, you are what you have. We are also accustomed to evaluate people by what they have. What one has is used as a measurement of one’s happiness. You are what you have: wealth, education, power, popularity, lack of handicap. So, the voice shouts out, act properly and gain respect! Erich Fromm wrote a book, To Have Or To Be. He points out that today’s mode of life is to have rather than to be.

Thirdly, you are what others think of you. We work tirelessly to present ourselves in a good light before others in the false belief that our identity comes from who we are in their eyes, or from what we do or what we have. We look to people outside ourselves to tell us if we are unique, acceptable, and good. We need to know from those around us if we pass the test of being someone unique and loveable. This thinking is encouraged by the world in which we live: How much money does he make? What does she own? Who does he know? Is she famous? What can he do for me? What are they writing about her? If I don’t do well or have enough money, success, or a good reputation, then I am nothing.

We are not what we do. We are not what we have. We are not what others think us. We are the beloved children of our loving Creator. We no longer have to beg for permission from the world to exist. Solomon, the wisest man who was prestigious, had prosperity and popularity in the Bible, said “Meaningless, meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!” Wisdom is meaningless. Pleasures are meaningless. Riches are meaningless. Advancement is meaningless. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man, for God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

Prestige, Prosperity and Popularity are the temptations that we face everyday. Jesus, our Lord, was being tempted by Satan and by the three voices of prestige, of prosperity, and

of popularity. And, he showed us how to drive the temptations out. He showed us how he defeated the power of evil. Great blessings are usually followed by great temptations. And, also after great temptation, great blessing followed as well. But, every temptation is an opportunity to grow. On the path to spiritual maturity, even temptation becomes a stepping-stone rather than a stumbling block when you realize that it is just as much an occasion to do the right thing as it is to do the wrong thing.

The Bible encourages us to face the temptation. “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” (Heb. 2:18)

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. (Heb 4:15)

May the Lord, a high priest, be with you and enable you to defeat the temptation of this world and affirm in you your true identity as the Children of God during this Lenten season.