

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, February 21, 2010



The Ongoing Temptation of Christ

a sermon by the Rev. Warren L. Pittman

Text: Luke 4:1-13

It's usually not until the final scenes in a movie that we get to this point in the story.

Screenwriters build the tension between the hero and the villain in a variety of ways, however it is that the plot is unfolding, but in the end it comes down to the good guy and the bad guy, one on one, *mano a mano*.

In the costume epics, that usually means a swordfight that includes a lot of jumping around or swinging from chandeliers, but even in the most contemporary story, or futuristic fables, Robin Hood has to have it out with the Sherriff of Nottingham, Luke Skywalker has a final duel with Darth Vader, and James Bond, at last, against all odds, does away with the villain *du jour*.

There may be supporting characters, or even legions of others joining in the battle; there may be starships blasting away at each other across the galaxy, but we know the big scene will be that final face off, from which only one will emerge victorious (unless we're watching *Hamlet*, and *everybody* dies!)

But this morning, the hero – the guy in the white robe – and the villain – the guy in the red jumpsuit – are alone in the desert, in a verbal duel, with their “dialogical swords” crossing ... and the movie has barely started! Come in late, and you'll miss it all!

And not only does this scene appear to be far too early, but at first hearing, there's not a lot of suspense to how the battle is going!

When we watch that *last* battle in the movies, we know the good guy is going to win, but at least the director makes it look like the bad guy has a chance! The way Luke describes Jesus' so-called “temptation” by the devil, it sounds to me like Jesus barely breaks a sweat!

In a couple of those old costume flicks, there is that scene in which, say Zorro, duels with an obviously inferior opponent, who works up a real lather while the hero parries, spars, and deflects each thrust with but a flick of the wrist, and sometimes, without even looking! The good guy just “toys” with his adversary.

Today, listen again:

The devil says, "OK, Mr. 'Son of God,' turn this boulder into a biscuit." Jesus parries with, "Scripture tells us, 'There's more to life than muffins.'"

The devil says, "Worship me, and I'll give you the world!" Jesus backhands with, "That bible I mentioned before? It tells us to worship God, the One, and only One, who's *really* in charge."

Then the devil jumps with Jesus to the Temple-top and says, "Take a dive! That God you worship won't let you hit the ground, 'cause that Bible you're so quick to quote tells you that you've got angels watching your back." And Jesus, finishes him off with, "Tell me something I *don't* know, or stop wasting God's and my time."

To switch the metaphor from sword-fighting to tennis, that's three - love: "Game, Set and Match!"

Where's the suspense? Where's the drama? What kind of storytelling is this?

I'm almost ready to give up on Luke, until he – and only he among the three evangelists that tell the wilderness story – adds that last verse: *When the devil had finished every test, he departed ... until an opportune time.*

When I read that, I begin to realize that Luke may be a lot better storyteller than I thought!

I've long wondered about where this traditional First Sunday in Lent Gospel came from. I've not been all that comfortable with it being something Jesus would have shared with his disciples.

Maybe it started out the way Mark tells it. In his version, Jesus is baptized and then "*the Spirit ... drove him out into the wilderness. ... [where he was] tempted by Satan...*" That's pretty much it.

After several years of telling and retelling this story, with there having been a few sermons preached on it, I'm guessing Matthew and Luke – or somebody – *added* the familiar "transcripts" of the conversation between Jesus and the devil. Kris Kristofferson may have sung about a time he "Beat the Devil," but I just can't hear Jesus singing his own version of that tune.

So I go back to the start of today's story, and begin to wonder if what I hear Luke telling me this morning is less about a "duel" between Jesus and the Tempter than it is about the "challenge" Jesus faced, not just there in the wilderness, but throughout his ministry.

To go back to the old movie analogy, don't you just love how you get to hear the bad guy spill his whole plan to the good guy before they ever really get into a fight?

“Let me show you what I have in store for you, you so-called ‘Son of God’; for in the months and years *ahead* there will be plenty of ‘opportune times’ when we will continue this conversation.”

And then I flip ahead through the chapters that follow, and, thanks to Luke, find that there may be more to certain other stories than I first noticed.

Luke includes, as do all the Gospel narratives, the story of when Jesus did pretty much turn stones into bread – not for himself, but for others. He did other pretty amazing things, as well; all real potential crowd pleasers.

Luke now has me picturing the devil right there at hand, “tempting” Jesus with a very *attentive* audience, willing to listen to every word and to follow him anywhere ... as long as he keeps them *contented* and satisfied. “Just keep saying what *they* want to hear and doing what *they* want you to do, and they’re yours, Jesus, they’re yours.”

Luke lets me hear the devil singing rhythms of revolution into Jesus’ ear as the massed crowds along Jerusalem’s streets sing *Hosanna, Son of King David*, and offer him the people’s Key to the City, “You’ve got the power to usurp an empire: use it, Jesus, use these people and *be* the King they think you are.”

Jesus doesn’t get to the top of the Temple, but in the Temple’s shadow, there in the courtyard of the Governor’s fortress, Luke lets me imagine the devil whisper to Jesus a little reminder of those Guardian Angels who are but a beck and call away, ready to smash the cross into splinters and turn the Way of Sorrows up onto Skull Hill into a Victory Parade. “There’s an easier way to do this, Jesus. Turn this crucifixion into a coronation!”

No, Jesus’ Temptations were not confined to a six-week wilderness survival test.

Each and every day of his life was filled with temptations to be less than the Beloved Son he was called out of the waters of his baptism to be, to be less than the embodiment of God and God’s compassion and love he was born to reveal to the world.

And those temptations were not confined to Jesus life. The Temptation that Luke tells us about in this Gospel continued, and continue still.

The Apostles, about whom Luke is said to have written in the book of *Acts*, were constantly tempted to run, to hide, to compromise, to back down.

But they were the first members of what Paul soon called “The Body of Christ”: a name by which we call ourselves today; a Name we do not take in vain.

Our vocation is the same as theirs: to be the continuing physical manifestation of Jesus in the world, the continuing means by which the world knows about and experiences a loving, forgiving, life-giving God.

We are called to carry on the work of proclaiming Good News, of seeking out and serving all humankind, of striving for justice and peace, by preaching, teaching, reconciling, feeding, healing, and care-fully loving *all* of God's creation.

And when we are serious about answering that call, *we* will be tempted: tempted to stop short, tempted to be less than who and what we are meant to be.

There are still for us, as there were for Jesus "opportune times" to be tempted by popular opinion and appeal ("What can we do to market ourselves better? What will make us more attractive? What do we want to avoid so as not to upset people?"); to be tempted to keep to ourselves to the neglect of others ("We need to take care of our own."); to be tempted to back down in the powerful face of injustice and worldly power ("Let's not get political: we might get in trouble, or lose our tax-exemption."); to be tempted to feel overwhelmed by the needs of the world ("We can't make that much of a difference, so why bother at all; let's just look after each other"); and to be tempted to place blame and responsibility for the world's problems on others ("When are 'they' going to do something about it?")

That's the reason we begin each Lent by opening our hands to the Risen Lord, around his table, asking for his sustenance and his strength to resist our temptations, and to follow him along this Way of the Cross, the Way of Life.

...Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin. By his grace we are able to triumph over every evil, and to live no longer for ourselves alone, but for him, who died for us and rose again. ...

AMEN.