

Sermon, 25 February 2007—First Sunday in Lent

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91; Romans 10:5-13; Luke 4:1-13

Every year, the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is retold on the First Sunday in Lent. This is done for two reasons: because our Lent sojourn also extends for forty days, and because we hope to spend this time as Jesus did, reflecting on the barriers we are tempted to throw up between our self and God. The wilderness is consecrated ground for the writers of Scripture, because it is there that the People of Israel and God became betrothed to each other. Humanity and divinity turn to each other and pledge themselves to each other in the silent spaciousness of the desert, dry and clean and empty. Planted as the Tree of Life was in Eden, where we had everything, we took for granted that we could get more and lost it all. Drifting like dust through the wilderness of Sinai, where the manna that sustains us only lasted a day, we took for nothing for granted and learned to give thanks to the One who met us daily and carried us as on eagles' wings. In the desert our need for God and God's care for us both come to be known. The story of Jesus' temptation, then, along with the story of his death, is the primal story of his humanity. It means nothing for God to resist corrupt means and unworthy goals; it means everything for one of us to do so.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Abraham Maslow codified a hierarchy of needs, which he considered characteristic of all human beings. The primary needs are always those of physiological survival: air, food, water, sleep. We need these first. If we are deprived of them or if we sense they are in jeopardy, obtaining them trumps everything else. We know when we are thirsty and do not need to be encouraged or taught to look for water. Second come the needs for shelter and security. Once we have air and food, we look for ways to ensure them and protect ourselves.

The next two levels of need are social: it is possible to satisfy the first two alone, but the two that follow require society. Maslow thought our third level of needs was for belonging and affection and partnership. Sexual intimacy and childrearing are an aspect of what impels us here, but they are not the only reason we seek other human beings out. We want to be known and love by someone like us. Fourth come all the enlarged social needs: concerns about esteem, recognition, value, respect. Of course, this fourth level of need also depends on our generativity: are we contributing creatively, within a vocation that we prize, working among colleagues?

Only then, Maslow thought, once these basic needs are addressed, do our goals of self-actualization and beauty and meaning and transcendence arise. The wonder of this level is the need to fulfill the self by going beyond the self. The previous four levels have been self-preserving, but they never quench our desire to lose our self in something greater than our self.

When we lack the first four—sustenance, shelter, companionship, esteem—we sense in ourselves a rising level of anxiety that, not only lets us know something is wrong, but points us in the direction of the solution. Anxiety at the fifth level is more rarified: a vague longing or restlessness. We do not always recognize when we are short-changing our needs at the level of transcendence. We misunderstand the irritability that arises and think somehow that something is awry at the lower levels, as if we were not getting enough affection, enough recognition, enough satisfaction. But once we realize that no amount of affection or recognition or satisfaction brings us peace, and that sometimes pursuing them only irritates us more, then we have the clue that our need is, in every sense, beyond us.

Now, Luke and Maslow would agree on how the ante gets raised in the three temptations. The first temptation matches Maslow's basic levels:

since, if we are to pursue anything else, we must first of all survive. Food remains always a fundamental priority, so perhaps these stones ought to become bread.... Luke places as the second temptation what Maslow also sees as a second category of needs: when survival is no longer at risk, personal power and recognition, the gratifications of identity, the ability to command the attention and response of others, these become our hungers, so perhaps I should establish myself in the kingdoms of this world....

The third temptation, though, is about transcendent meaning: we want to take what is greater than our self and bend it and bind it until it is only about our self. This is the temptation to drain and twist Scripture until it is a little broken desiccated thing that we clutch against reality and hang around our neck like a talisman, as if our twittering terrors were its purpose. This temptation is sinister because it involves bending God's Word to our will.

Now, remember: Luke is the Gospel writer who took the texts in which the Church had collected the stories and sayings of Jesus, the Gospel of Mark being the primary source, and reworked them—I do not dare to say rewrote them—in order to tell the story of Jesus in a way that conveyed his conviction that the message of Jesus was valid for Gentiles. He wrote to persuade others that Jesus' proclamation of salvation by the forgiveness of sins was now Good News for Gentiles. To do this, he conceived of Jesus as the crown of Jewish prophecy, the key of all Hebrew Scripture, the capstone of a structure now to be inhabited by others. Luke himself, in other words, knew this third temptation. He had stood on the pinnacle of the Jewish Temple and tested the promises of that Scripture by launching himself off into the open empty space of Gentile belief, to see if the messengers of God, the quick-winged proclamation of God's graciousness, would bear his words up into the hearts of his readers. He had every reason to see the temptation

that he places last as a fearful temptation, one he might discover he had already succumbed to. He had every reason to fear taking the words of Scripture and twisting them into demonstrations of his own God-endorsed identity, of his own skill at self-depiction and self-interpretation, of his own power to persuade, even to bend the words of God to his own will. He tottered in the grip of that vertigo every time he picked up his pen.

“Tempting” means “testing;” when we are tempted, we are tested. But woe to those who tempt God, who test God, who set themselves up as the assessors of their Creator! We put God to the test by calling in God’s promises as if they were debts owed to us—and debts owed to us by a slippery con artist that might at any moment skip town. This Luke did not do, because he wrote, not for his own consolation, but for the salvation of others. But not all of us are so self-forgetting when we approach Scripture. What makes this so difficult, dear sisters and brothers, is that the promises in Scripture *are* made to us; we *are* meant to claim them. What corrupts that claim, though, is to demand that these promises, which we consider already overdue, cluster deferentially around our self-defining needs, rather than the needs of the People of God. We would prefer that the fulfillment of God’s promises coddle our infantile fears, console our self-absorbing grief, even obey our muffled rage. We put God to the test when we bend the Word of God to our own designs, rather than study it to discern the unfolding of God’s Reign, as disclosed already in Scripture and Tradition. Nothing in God’s Word would justify Jesus indulging in aerial displays of power, but the welcome of Gentiles into the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham is true to God’s ever-deepening ever-widening reach in Scripture.

And, of course, nowhere is this temptation more potent than in the courts of the Lord’s House. So it must be in the Temple the Jesus is tempted

to test God. Religious institutions have always provided the greatest opportunities to test God. As Luke knew, those who make their living parsing and deploying God's Word, are those most tempted to shade the meaning—or sometimes, frankly, to hold Scripture hostage and force it at gun point to speak into the camera with a smile, as if all were well.

We need no other reminder of the riskiness of this temptation that the history of Anglicanism in our day. The bitter implacable ruthless war between the incompatible elements of Anglicanism—its Catholic inheritance and its Protestant convictions, its comprehensiveness and its high standards, its worldliness and its austerity—has been going on since its foundation. Anglicanism has long been the attempt, the blessed earnest worthy attempt, not to subject one human preference in the worship of God to another, but to make room for all at God's table. Our ancestors in religion were forced into this because Anglicanism took root in an island, where folk had to learn to get along and to make room for each other.

But we have entered dark days, in which our tolerance for tolerance seems depleted. Complexity cannot be sustained by the quick solutions we all crave, but interdependent complexity is precisely what makes up every ecosystem and biosphere, in nature and in society and in the church, and patience and respect are built into every sustainable environment. The demands we hear on both sides for simple final answers mask a hysterical and ruthless repudiation of our world, which appears out of control and threatening and contemptuous of religion when it is not contemptuous of the dignity of every human being.

It seems to me that this darkness deepens into impenetrability around us when the Church, of all places where faith and hope and love ought to stabilize our reactions and set aside our fear and vindictiveness, has become

one of the principal fields of battle—“but ‘twas ever so.” There was no period when the Church did not struggle with boundaries and criteria for membership, and that is what is going on still today. We must mourn when the Body of Christ is once again beaten, taunted to prophecy, and stripped.

Some of you will have read articles about the gathering of the Primates in Dar es Salaam. You may even have read their Communiqué, in which they lay out the terms they expect the Episcopal Church to meet by this fall. These terms are alien to Anglicanism as we have known it in this country. The Primates demand unequivocal submission in good conscience to Lambeth resolutions that have never before in the history of our church been treated as binding, concessions and consent to the jurisdiction of bishops from outside a diocese for alleged pastoral purposes within that diocese, a complete systematic and church-wide end to all sacramental affirmation of Gay and Lesbian persons, and a pledge made by our House of Bishops on behalf of our entire church that these demands will be met. Our bishop, Jim Jelinek, has assured our diocese that he will not retract, but defend, decisions reached by this diocese and by the entire church in lawful and prayerful gatherings. Other bishops have said the same. Of course, in many other places, the ultimatum of the Primates is welcomed.

All I wish to say about that this morning—other than to ask for your prayers for our church—is this: everyone involved in these catastrophes could be accused of the willful bending of God’s Word to their will. The more intractable and stubborn an ideological claim becomes, the more it bends everything, anything, any person, any group, any institution, to its intended goal, which is unconditional surrender of the opposition.

The Primates of the Global South see in the Episcopal Church only a capitulation to cultural decadence. We have failed to demonstrate that this

widening embrace of all sorts and conditions of people is the result of discovering the constantly enlarging proclamation of the Good News. It is Evangelistic at its heart. It tries to live out what we saw in the life of Jesus: that no category of person is repudiated by God. I am convinced that our church is not bending the Word of God to our will, or surrendering to secularism, but discerning God's Spirit at work where we did not expect it. Once again, God has run ahead of the Church, as God did in the conversion of the Gentiles in the first century. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Good News is carried abroad where we could not have expected it, as seeds are blown across an ocean onto barren terrain, wild and deserted, empty and bare, where their God-given life takes root and flourishes. If that is so—and how else, except by God's breath, could people a culture holds in contempt, come to believe themselves loved and blessed except by the life-giving Spirit of God?—if God is at work, against all odds, to say to God's own creation, in their own hearing, that they are “good” and “beloved,” and if Gay and Lesbian people bear that witness to the Church, then all the Church can say is, “this is the LORD's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes,” and give thanks to one who will not let our foot trip against a stone, but will bear us up, if we trust in Him, into the blessed life of the Holy Trinity, whom we praise this day.