

“Overcoming Temptation”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
I Lent – 21 February 2010  
Luke 4:1-13

When Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, it was no trip to the Blue Ridge Mountains. John was baptizing in a relatively isolated stretch of the Jordan River. Jesus went further into the middle of nowhere, a rough part of the world. If you’ve ever watched a reality survival show on cable, like Bear Gryls, where they drop him off in a scrubby desert where the guy has to eat bugs and grubs just to keep alive, then you’ve got a fair idea of where Jesus spent the first forty days after his baptism.

Of course, we’re fortunate that our faith rarely calls us to go into such places, but we can connect with the story of Jesus in the wilderness, because next to forgiving people who hurt us, resisting temptation is probably the toughest thing we are called to do as Christians.

In the wilderness, the devil tried three temptations: stones to bread; rule the world, jump off the Temple summit. The first temptation was directed toward Jesus’ hunger, and we might think there would have been no harm in using his God-given power to turn a rock into a bagel, but taking that initiative would have been tantamount to rejecting his reliance upon God, because to do so would have been an insinuation that God was not providing adequately for Jesus’ needs.

The second temptation offered control over the Earth, which would have supposedly enabled Jesus to accomplish his overall mission without having to die on a cross, but if Jesus had succumb to this temptation, he would have betrayed both his Father in heaven and his identity as God’s son, who came into the world to unleash saving power through his death, not to seize Earthly power for himself.

The third temptation suggested that Jesus jump off the Temple crest, because the Psalms say that God would send angels to catch Jesus. This would have been incredibly impressive to onlookers. However, it would have been a vain attempt to attract attention and adulation, a misuse of God's power that would have harmed the fulfillment of God's purpose.

As we can see, temptation carefully conceals the cost of giving in. What could be lost is made to look insignificant compared with what might be gained. We, too, need to be aware of the hidden losses embedded within temptation, so that we might not give up what is truly good for what seems to be good.

Of course, none of us can turn a hunk of limestone into Wonder bread, or become King of the world by worshipping Satan, and we all understand the law of gravity just fine, but the temptations Jesus faced are very similar to what we deal with on a daily basis.

Take, for instance, turning stones to bread. Satan was essentially telling Jesus, "Look, you can make this happen, and you need to. If you keep starving yourself, you won't be able to fulfill your mission."

When we find ourselves in desperate circumstances, our tendency is to make things happen, but we need to do so only when exercising our power accords with God's purpose.

Otherwise, we can lose sight of the fact

that God alone provides all good gifts, and such spiritual blindness can cause us to believe that we are self-sufficient, and need no one's help, even God.

This is a very prevalent temptation in a nation as individualistic as our own. It's not that God wants us to sit around and wait for direct divine intervention to fill our refrigerators and gas tanks. That would be irresponsible. Rather God intends us to understand and remain reverent to

the reality that everything good, no matter how simple or sensational, is a gift from God, not purely a product of our own efforts.

Likewise, we know that cannot rule the world, but we often find ourselves tempted to take charge of our little corner of it in ways that do not please God. We may feel the need to exert dominance in relationships with family or schoolmates or co-workers, and that need may emerge from noble, well-intentioned motives. But isn't this impulse for control similar to the temptation Jesus faced, only at a much smaller scale?

When we attempt to be in control, or actually manage to do so, we make other people miserable, and if we're honest about it, it makes us miserable, too, because we have put ourselves in the place of God – just like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, when they were tempted to become like gods by eating of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

When we feel tempted to exert control over others, what we really need is to practice greater self-control. Otherwise, we damage a lot of important relationships. A high need for control is fundamentally incompatible with the nurture of genuine relationships, and without relationships with God and others, we become more vulnerable to the predator called temptation.

Then there's fame, which is like a live cricket on a line in our culture, where people eagerly accept humiliation for a chance to be well-known to perfect strangers in a very superficial way. But there's a hook in that cricket that can drag us from the life-giving waters of our baptism and bring us to spiritual death. None of us are likely to be contestants on American Idol or Big Brother, but when we become obsessed with human praise, we've taken the bait of temptation, placed our trust in the fickle opinions of others, and made ourselves terribly sensitive

to slights and insults, both real and perceived. This makes us miserable, which is precisely what Satan wants.

Fame is merely a pale reflection of glory, and when we seek fame, it reveals our desire to be glorified. Satan wanted Jesus to take a dramatic leap off the Temple's pinnacle to prove that God's Word was true and to bring Jesus fame. Jesus knew how this would exploit God's goodness, and how misguided it was, because fame cannot lead people from sin to righteousness, from death to life. Jesus also knew that glory is meant for God alone.

The way that Jesus consistently rejected temptation was by quoting scripture, which you can't do if you don't know it, and you can't know it if you haven't read it, preferably more than once, preferably not all by yourself. It was with scripture that Jesus kept his bearings and stayed secure in his knowledge of God's perfect love; thereby defeating his opponent, despite his weakened condition. That's our best play, too, but do we have enough to fight back with?

You probably know more than you think. Worship in the Episcopal Church is saturated with scripture. We don't quote it chapter and verse, but the Prayer Book is like a full sponge: squeeze it and the Bible flows out. Yet even scripture-laden worship cannot substitute for the patient, careful reflection on scripture that needs to be regular habit of the Christian disciple.

Last week, I encouraged you to find a way to pray every day. Today, I ask you to set aside another sliver of time, if you don't already, to dwell with God through the scripture. If you feel unqualified, find a study group, or ask for help. There are plenty of commentaries, written at various levels of difficulty, which can serve as guides through scripture.

If you feel like you just don't have the time, think of the most miserable place you've ever been – physically, emotionally, or spiritually – getting your chops busted by the most malevolent figure you can imagine. If that doesn't motivate you to spend more time with

scripture, which is accurately described within its own pages as both sword and shield, then I don't know how to motivate you.

A lesser, but very compelling, reason to read scripture is that over time you may find it fun. Avid reading of scripture may alter your perception, showing opportunity where you thought there was only danger. Scripture can also bring peace to a troubled soul, and transform you into a person humble enough to repair broken relationships, courageous enough to extend yourself beyond what you thought were your limits, unafraid of what may happen, because you know that God is real, and God cares.

However, above all, scripture is essential to resist the many temptations that assault us daily, from our overweening need for control to our hunger for powers that are God's alone to our desire for fame and adulation, when glory by right belongs only to God. By resisting these and other temptations, we avert misery and disaster, live with greater joy and peace, and honor the God who gives all good gifts, including the grace to see and shutdown temptation when it comes to rob us of what we need most. And we can resist temptation without having to go to a place where to stay alive we must eat bugs and grubs, which seems like a good enough deal to me. Amen.