

Decision in the Desert
Scripture Lesson: Luke 4: 1-13

Over a decade ago, the movie Places In the Heart won critical and popular acclaim for its depiction of the struggles of a Depression-era widow, Edna Spalding. To make ends meet, Edna takes in a blind boarder known as Mr. Will.

During the day, Mr. Will makes brooms and canes chairs. He passes his evenings with his pride and joy, a wind-up Victrola upon which he plays recordings for the blind.

He listens particularly to one, certain story the opening words of which filter regularly from his small room and waft throughout the motion picture like a refrain:

*Between what matters and what seems to matter,
how will this world we know choose wisely?*

Therein lies the focus of Places In the Heart. Therein lies the focus of the temptation of Jesus.

Perhaps the Gospel accounts contribute to the difficulty we have with this phase of our Lord's life. After all, the narratives read with such sterile precision. Luke introduces the situation succinctly:

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the
Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in
the wilderness, and tempted by the Devil.*

Sounds easy enough. Maybe we craft within our minds images of a weekend retreat, a time when Jesus left the hustle and bustle of everyday life...took a little time... went to get his head straight.

At the very worst, we envision a stoic, stainless-steel caricature of a man, bravely enduring an ascetic environment, his body gaunt, his face a plaster cast, his voice dripping with stained glass:

Get thee behind me, Satan!

But, the Christ's wilderness experience could not have been so, because it would not then have proved much of a temptation.

Nikos Kazantzakis paints a graphic portrayal of the Master's desert encounter with the Prince of Darkness in his novel, The Last Temptation of Christ. It is a scene fearfully and wonderfully rendered by Martin Scorsese in his tempest in a teapot film by the same name, which rippled the ecclesiastical waters in the early 1990's.

Jesus awakens to a blast-furnace sun, the fiery countenance of God, and with a reed, inscribes a circle around the rock He has claimed as His desert home. He refuses to leave until He hears God's voice-- clearly and unmistakably.

After a series of visions, a visitor comes-- a snake-- a pitch-black cobra. "I felt sorry for you, Son of Mary," she hisses. "You cried...I pitied You and came."

"I don't want you. I didn't call. Who are you?"

"Your soul."

The serpent spreads before the hungry, thirsting Galilean a panorama of delicious life options and Jesus struggles with these delectable demons throughout the evening. (Here, we pick up the narration:)

As [Jesus] was about to open His mouth to say, “Yes,” He felt someone above looking down on him. Terrified, He lifted His head and saw two eyes in the air, two eyes only, as black as night, and two white eyebrows which were moving and signaling to Him: No! No! No! Jesus heart contracted. He looked up beseechingly, as if He wished to scream.

“No! No! No!” Jesus then shouted, and two large tears rolled from His eyes.

All at once the serpent writhed, unglued herself from Him and with a muffled roar, exploded.

Jesus fell on His face. His mouth, nostrils, and eyes filled with sand. His mind was blank. Forgetting His hunger and thirst, He wept...

“Lord, Lord,” He murmured, biting the sand...”How many times shall I say it in the future. All my life I shall quiver, resist and say it: Your will be done.”

A young man sits inside a small, sandy circle...alone... frightened... wrestling... trying to choose wisely between what matters and what seems to matter.

Most of us remember the story. The Tempter appears before the young man from Nazareth, and, to quote Professor Henry Higgins: “oozing charm from every pore, he [oils] his way [across] the floor.”

Note how the assault begins. Satan says, “*If you are the Son of God.*” Throw in a little doubt. Why not shake Him up a little? After all, lonely as He is...vulnerable to the desert wolves of heat and cold, starvation and dehydration...He might crumble. He’s been here a long time with no relief.

Surely He already wonders about the validity of the heavenly voices He has heard-- or thought He heard. *Did they really speak to you, Jesus? If you are the Son of God...*

Perhaps the tremors of doubt rumble in the Master’s viscera, but, though the Tempter’s attack digs in, despite a delirium brought on by exhaustion, the Galilean flings Himself down a familiar path. Like the seeker in Margaret Deland’s verse, Jesus lunges for His Parent:

O Thou! Unseen by me, that like a child
Tries in the night to find its mother’s heart,
And weeping wanders only more apart,
Not knowing in the darkness that she smiled--

Thou, all unseen, dost hear my tired cry.
As I, in darkness of a half-belief,
Grove for Thy heart, in love and doubt and grief:
O Lord! Speak soon to me-- “Lo, here am I!”

So, we approach the first possibility offered to the Master:

The devil said to Him: "...command this stone to become bread."

Most assuredly the allure of food appeals to a man left food-less in the wilderness. Jesus has been in the desert a long time. Wouldn't some fresh, hot bread simply melt in His mouth?

Moreover, the suggestion pins itself to a hungry man in a hungry world. Surely, when Jesus hears the word "bread," He sees the scrawny beggars in the streets of Jerusalem. He'd first encountered them as a boy on a trip with Mary and Joseph.

Shocking! No one begged in Nazareth. Everyone had some kin, or, at the very least, a sympathetic neighbor. But, in the city, with its heartless haste, men and women passed by the pan-waving derelicts without so much as a nod.

And the children-- orphaned waifs or offspring of runaway slaves-- lining the city thoroughfares-- their faces miniature death masks-- each scant meal only a temporary stay on execution order of starvation.

Jesus saw them, and never forgot. Years later, when He taught His disciples to pray, as soon as He finished the petitions of praise and thanksgiving to God, what were the first words from our Lord's lips? "Give us this day our *daily bread*."

Command this stone to become bread-- an apparently harmless, even beneficial suggestion. Yet, Jesus recognizes, as the New Testament scholar W.R. Nichol suggests:

The power of temptation consists in its appearance of being suggested without sinister intent.

You see, a subtle poison coils at the bottom of the vial labeled "Bread For the World." The Tempter tries to lure Jesus into acknowledging a reduction in the status of humanity-- into accepting people as less than that for which we have been created.

We do not stand immune to this temptation as witnessed by a society in which...

...virtue becomes equated with a certain standard of behavior...

...wealth with how many cash investments we hold...

...peace with the absence of domestic attack...

...wisdom with the mere acquisition of information.

Satan pushes Jesus toward honoring a concept of humanity in the barest and base-est terms-- not "you are what you eat," but "you are simply and only *because* you eat." Life, the great gift of a loving and creating God, then degenerates into a quest for survival.

But Jesus, unwilling to abandon His ministry for a bakeshop, replies:

One does not live by bread **alone**...

...because He wants desperately to choose wisely between what matters and what seems to matter.

The attack continues. Showing the Galilean a kaleidoscope of opportunities for power and wealth, Satan announces, *To You I will give all this... if You will worship me*.

Perhaps the suggestion smacks us as laughable. Jesus worship someone other than God? Get out! But, remember the humanity of the Master-- remember the very human frailty of this

man who absolutely *knows* He can provide the leadership...the hope... the vision for which the world gasps.

I imagine our Lord did not hide his burning desire too awfully well. His zeal to lead appears so transparently to the Tempter, that the price for world control wears no disguise. Satan does not even bother to set a trap.

You would rule? Reject the Holy!

Lower your standards just a bit. *Compromise.*

Oh, how we love that word, especially in the Church.

Don't expect too much of your members.

Don't mention responsibility.

Study about Jesus, the Just, but leave off Jesus, the Judge.

Be content with what folk give from their excess. Stay away from any talk of proportional giving.

Never raise the issue of economic inequity... leave gender discrimination alone... and just ignore the racial barriers in the business and social communities which exist in every society in this nation because if you mention any of that stuff, you'll make people mad.

Stand content to replace the fire of the Holy with the fuzzy warmth of something, anything, that proves workable in the present.

But Jesus, refusing to forsake His principles for the golden calf of expediency, says:

Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him...

...because He's beginning to comprehend what it means to choose wisely between what matters and what seems to matter.

The third temptation proves difficult. Unsuccessful in his first two tries, the Tempter moves to another tactic:

...[he] took [Jesus] to Jerusalem, and set Him on the pinnacle of the Temple and said... "If you are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here; for it is written, 'He will give His angels charge of You to guard You and on their hands they will bear You lest You strike Your foot against a stone.'"

Here Jesus faces the greatest challenge. Whether He actually peers over the landscape from the top of the Temple in Jerusalem, or whether the physical pounding of His exile brings on an hallucination we do not know-- it's really not important. However the event comes to pass, the Master firmly hears the syrupy voice of temptation:

If you are who you say you are, you should not have to struggle. You should replace God with something else. You might try something theatrical.

The voice begins worming its way into Jesus' heart, "You cannot be harmed. You should

not be harmed. Are You not the Lord's beloved? Shouldn't the Almighty watch over You. Don't You deserve some sort of a break?"

Other voices swirl from the mists of the future...

...Caiaphas: "If You are the Son of God, tell us..."

...Pilate: "If You are the Son of God, show me..."

...Faceless cries of mocking: "If You are the Son of God, come down from there..."

..."A nameless thief: "If You are the Son of God, save Yourself and us as well..."

At this very moment, Jesus must decide how He will serve. No, we cannot fully appreciate exactly what He understands, in a chronological sense, about the coming events of His life. But, when the Tempter speaks, the Lord surely knows He faces a choice... a terrible choice...a life-altering, life-ending choice between physical security and trust in God.

Jesus has to decide which way to go. Either: "If You are God, take care of me,"

or: "Because You are God, I give myself to You."

The dawn begins to break on the Master that a ministry of condition neither heals nor redeems.

When asked the secret of his success in forming the Salvation Army, William Booth replied:

I will tell you the secret. God has had all there was of me. There have been men with greater brains than I, men with greater opportunities. But from the day I got the poor in London on my heart and caught a vision of what Jesus Christ could do with them, on that day, I made up my mind that God should have all of William Booth there was. And if there is anything of power in the Salvation Army today, it is because the Lord has had all the power of my will and all the influence of my life.

So, Jesus, taking aim with the arrow of His existence at the target of God, steps away from the precipice, because now He sees what it takes to choose wisely between what matters and what seems to matter.

God of grace and God of glory,
On Thy people pour Thy power;
Crown Thine ancient Church's story;
Bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
For the facing of this hour.

Cure Thy children's warring madness,
Bend our pride to Thy control;
Shame our wanton selfish gladness,
Rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
Lest we miss Thy Kingdom's goal

Save us from weak resignation
To the evils we deplore;
Let the search for Thy salvation
Be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
Serving Thee whom we adore,
Serving Thee whom we adore!
Amen

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