

Resisting the Devil's 'If': The Work of Lent

“With great power comes great responsibility.” No, that’s not in the Bible. That’s Uncle Ben from Spiderman, Peter Parker’s uncle. A corollary to that sage advice might be, “With great power comes great temptation.” That isn’t in the Bible either, but it is implicit in today’s Gospel. It appears to be an infallible rule of spiritual life: the more power you possess, the more you will be tempted to misuse it. Even Jesus seems vulnerable.

How else to explain today’s Gospel, which begins: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.” Pardon my language, but what the devil is going on here? Does the Spirit not know who waits for Jesus in the wilderness? Why does the Spirit deliver Jesus to the devil in a handbasket? I am tempted to suggest that the Spirit and the Devil are cooperating in Jesus’s spiritual formation. But that can’t be, can it? That would make for a strange tag team operation indeed. Such “cooperation” suggests that being tempted is not intrinsically evil; painful perhaps but not evil.

But before we dive into that daunting query, there is a prior question. Shouldn’t Jesus be immune from temptation because he is, “full of the Holy Spirit.” Remember what has just transpired in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus has just been baptized. He has just heard a voice from heaven say to him, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Surely, surely, if there is any time that Jesus could not possibly be tempted, it would be when he is grounded in the knowledge and love of God.

Wouldn’t that be lovely? Isn’t that what we tell ourselves? It must be due to some failing on my part that I am tempted. I am tempted because I am unfaithful, lazy or unspiritual. I am vulnerable to temptation only because I am far from God. Judging by our Gospel, these notions, however earnestly held, are misguided. Nothing in scripture, tradition, or experience suggests that intimacy with the Divine renders us immune from temptation. No, you are tempted because you are human.

Well, that’s a bummer isn’t it? You would think that a vivid sense of God’s love should give us some kind of hall pass. Sorry, Mr. Devil, I am so holy that, as the old M.C. Hammer song goes, “Can’t touch this!”

If Jesus wasn’t spared, we won’t be either. What could be a greater temptation than to believe that our holiness exempts us from the human condition and its vulnerabilities? What great harms have been done precisely by those who have lived in intimacy with God. The history of religion is full of betrayals by priests, by gurus, by Roshis, and Lamas. The great charisma that comes from divine intimacy is a double-edged sword. The greater your spiritual power, the greater the temptation toward abuse.

So, what good does being full of the Spirit do? First, intimacy with Spirit grants self-awareness. Jesus can recognize a temptation as a temptation! Most of us cannot. Why? There is in every heart a yearning to affirm that we are good, decent, and kind people. We want to think well of ourselves. That hardly counts as a great sin. But that apparently innocuous desire to think well of ourselves, of our communities, of our nations can become an attachment to and investment in the myth of innocence that blinds us to the darkness within.

We are living through a great unveiling in our churches through the ghastly discoveries at Residential Schools. That happened on our watch because we were persuaded about the

righteousness of our ways. We could not imagine that we, of all people, could be tempted to perpetrate cultural genocide and mass death. Americans maybe but not Canadians and especially not progressive Anglicans. We are the good and righteous ones! The temptation to believe the best about ourselves rendered us oblivious and willfully ignorant about what we were doing.

Perhaps that is why Jesus is so quick to object when he is called “good.” “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone!” We have been taught to hear Jesus as engaged in false modesty or irony. After all, we “know” that Jesus is not just good but Divine. But what if instead Jesus’s words demonstrate his absolute disinterest in being regarded as either innocent or good? The Spirit braces Jesus with courage to see the truth about himself, that he is truly human and so necessarily vulnerable to temptation. Because the Spirit gives him the gift of self-awareness, She enables Jesus to recognize and fend off temptations as they arise. Nothing, nothing at all, can more effectively obscure our capacity to recognize temptation than our captivity to the myth of innocence, the myth that we are invulnerable to temptation. The power of the Spirit is like a surgeon’s scalpel cutting through that most basic temptation of all—the temptation to believe that we cannot be tempted.

Does that mean we ought not to think well of ourselves? Don’t we all stand in need of basic self-worth? Well, yes, but authentic self-worth doesn’t come from telling ourselves the lie that we are innocent. Authentic self-worth comes from knowing that we are loved! I know that my Mom loved me. I know that Dad loves me. I know that my wife loves me—and that is really saying something because she knows all that is dark, convoluted, and unfinished in me. And still, she loves me. Our partners know us best, don’t have to stick with us, but still do and find ways to keep on loving us. I don’t know how or why, but they do. (Isn’t that right Sharleen?) Love grants us the illumination and courage to know the truth about ourselves in all its tangled complexity including our shadow sides. Grounded in the Spirit’s illumining love, we do not have to prop up our egos by deceiving ourselves about who we are. We can recognize our temptations for what they are.

And what about the Devil’s role in this narrative? We know that the Devil has a long career in Biblical and post-Christian Biblical imagination. Think Dante and Milton. We fuse and confuse a great deal of material to cook up the figure we now call the Devil. In Job, we know that *Ha-Satan* functions as prosecuting attorney in the Heavenly Court. He is not God’s rival. Far from it.

In the New Testament, the Devil’s tale turns darker. In neither Testament is the Devil God’s equal. God has no equal. In this story, the Devil tests and tries Jesus. He is Jesus’s adversary, which is one way of translating the Greek word, “*diabolos*.” And what does the adversary do? The Devil invites Jesus to misuse his immense power. “Jesus, you’ve just heard a voice from heaven saying that you are God’s Beloved Son. That’s great news. You are God’s chosen instrument. You must have immense power and virtually endless capacities. Let’s put that to the test, shall we, and see what that means. What you can do with that power?” It’s quite the invitation.

I am not sure what to think of the Devil, but it seems fair to say that apart from being tested by the Devil, Jesus might become one himself. It is precisely by being tried—in the fierce double grip of the Spirit and the Devil, that Jesus becomes who is meant to be. Jesus’s story is universal. We read that young Siddhartha Gautama, on the night before he was enlightened, confronted the Demon Mara and his seductive daughters, the final step before he became the Awakened One, the Buddha. We can conclude that the great spiritual figures of the world’s traditions are keenly aware that their enormous powers might be deployed for good or for ill. Before they or we can wield our powers for the good, we must come into awareness about just

how tempting it would be to wield them for harm. Temptation is thus a necessary and inevitable part of Jesus's spiritual formation and ours. There is no bypassing it.

Now we moderns might refuse personified Devil talk and speak instead about the dark, roiling urges of our unconscious; either way it comes to the same thing. The Spirit's love and truth filled light must illumine, irradiate, and heal what is tormented, uncertain, and wounded in us lest our hungers get the better of us.

Now, time grows short so let us take a quick glance at just the first of Jesus's temptations. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." About this single verse, we could say so very much. But note its most subtle feature, that first little word: "If." If. The Devil skillfully sows seeds of doubt with that tiny word. Are you really God's beloved? Maybe you were just hearing things? A voice from heaven, come on now? Can you be sure? The tempter cannot make headway if Jesus's deep sense of being loved by God isn't cast into question. It is the crucial chink that must be put in the armor that will make Jesus yield to temptation.

The Spirit does not exempt us from temptation, but She does empower us to bear up under its excruciating heat. The content of the temptation is secondary. Our temptations will vary. We will not face what Jesus faced. No off the rack, one size fits temptations from the Devil; all His wares are custom made.

But for every one of us, the odds of surrendering to temptation depends on introducing one basic doubt. Am I really loved? Does anyone see me? Do I really matter?

We can learn a lot about temptation from the latest in addiction research. Researcher Johann Hari put it brilliantly in his TED Talk: "The opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection." All our addictions—power, sex, drugs, whatever—are false substitutes for fruitful connection, another word for love. Only the confidence that we are beloved will suffice. The assurance that we are loved, that is the Spirit's primary gift. Steal away that gift, and we are all breakable.

So, what are we take away from this narrative this Lenten Season? Tradition teaches us that Lent should be a time dedicated to self-examination, repentance and amending our ways as we prepare for resurrection. It is demanding work, and we are certain to trip over ourselves and fall into further confusion, temptation, and loss, if we don't begin where Jesus begins, a rooted and abiding confidence in the Spirit filled knowledge that we are absolutely, utterly, and infinitely loved by God. So, Lent is the season in which we practice resisting the Devil's if. Beloved, let me assure you, in God there is no if. What Jesus heard and believed, we must also. You are God's child, the Beloved! This Lent, let us learn to rest ever more deeply in the confidence that we are Loved so that Love can empower us to meet temptation with self-awareness, honesty, courage, and connection and so enter into New Life. Amen.