

## Anatomy of a Temptation

Mark 1:9-15

In the Netflix series “Lucifer” the Devil takes a vacation from his job of overseeing Hell to assume human form and have some fun on earth as a glitzy playboy. In the opening scene of the pilot episode, Lucifer is breezing around the brightly lit streets of LA in a flashy sports car--until he is pulled over for speeding by a Highway Patrol Officer. As the officer approaches the car, Lucifer pulls out a wad of cash and offers it as a bribe. The patrolman is indignant at first, reminding Lucifer that accepting a bribe is against the law. Lucifer fixes his gaze on the policeman in a way that suggests that he is staring straight into the depths of his heart, and asks, “you break the law sometimes, don’t you officer?” The cop’s stern expression relaxes, as if he had just been injected with a dose of sodium pentothal. He admits to sometimes turning on his siren and driving real fast, for no reason at all...just because he can. No sooner does that confession escape his lips, a guilty expression crosses his face. But Lucifer is very sympathetic. He says, “Why wouldn’t you? It’s fun, right?” Thus, assured that maybe some forms of rule-breaking do no harm, the officer applies this new revelation to Lucifer’s offer. He accepts the bribe and lets Lucifer go on his way. The reason I mention this scene is that the fictional Lucifer in this story actually follows the exact same strategy for softening the policeman’s resistance as a law enforcer to becoming a law breaker as the actual Devil does in his attempts to tempt Jesus.

This morning we read one version of that temptation story; the one found in the Gospel of Mark. Mark’s gospel tells us that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by Satan. Mark himself could be cited for putting the pedal to the metal when you consider the breakneck pace at which his Gospel moves. By telling the story of Jesus’ life in more miles per word than the other three Gospel writers, a lot of details get left by the side of the road in Mark’s version. Like scenery whizzing by the passenger window of a speeding car. For instance, Mark doesn’t say anything about what *kinds* of temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness. But it is a fair assumption that they were the same temptations that are documented in greater detail in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. So, let’s review what those temptations were.

The first temptation of Jesus came when he was weak from hunger after fasting in the wilderness for forty days. The devil shows up and says, in what I can’t help but imagine as anything but the Netflix Lucifer’s voice, “Hungry, are you? Well, look around. There’s no one out here in the wilderness except you and me. You’re the Son of God, right? Why not use your power to turn some stones into bread! I promise I won’t tell a soul.”

The Devil’s argument is tempting. Jesus cheating on his commitment to a fast is, on the surface as harmless as the California Highway Patrolman putting on his siren and speeding, just because he can. But Jesus isn’t so easily fooled. He knows that if he allows physical hunger to get the best of him, how on earth would he ever stand his ground in the face of the emotional and physical trauma that awaited him on his way to the cross? His response is, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

So, the Devil tries the same strategy but a different approach. He transports Jesus to the roof of the Temple in Jerusalem and tells him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here. You know

that your Father won't let you fall to your death. His angels will save you right in front of all the crowds gathered in Jerusalem." Jesus knew that his life would end in Jerusalem with the rejection of the crowds and a torturous death on a cross.

The Devil's second temptation offers a painless shortcut to getting crowds of people on his Jesus' side through a spectacular, Evel Knievel style publicity stunt. But what Jesus also knows, is that there is no easy alternate route to the salvation of humanity, other than his own rejection and suffering. So, a second time he resists the Devil's temptation.

Finally, the Devil takes Jesus aside and says, "Look Jesus, I get it. Your objective is to save these people by getting them all to believe in you. But I can arrange that for you without you having to make all the painful sacrifices you think it will take. All you have to do is fall down and worship me, and I'll take care of the rest." One last time, Jesus declines the Devil's bribe, and sticks to the plan.

The anatomy of all of these temptations follows the same pattern as the scene from Lucifer. In both cases, the temptations offered a kind of permission. Not only permission to indulge a secret desire. But, permission to avoid making a personal sacrifice. Being tempted to DO something we know we SHOULDN'T be doing is only half the story. Temptation is also about being enticed into NOT doing, something that God asks us to do as followers of Jesus.

There are temptations that attack us at the point of vulnerability around pleasures that appeal to us. But other temptations find a soft spot in our reluctance to engage in that which demands courage, or sacrifice, or faith when our natural inclination is to pursue comfort, security and ease. Jesus' temptations were of that second category.

His temptations in the wilderness followed immediately upon his being baptized. One thing that happened when Jesus was baptized is that he publicly committed himself to being faithful to God's purpose for him, knowing that the road of faithfulness would lead to a cross. The Devil's strategy in each temptation was to give Jesus an out—a way to avoid the sacrifices required in following God's plan for him.

Our baptism is also a statement of our commitment to discerning and pursuing our part in God's plan for the world's salvation. Just as Jesus' baptism was. But the place where the rubber meets the road is in what it actually means to apply that commitment to the concrete realities of life. The Devil, as they say, is in the details. And it is in the details of life that temptations arise.

In the Lord's Prayer we ask for God to not lead us into temptation. Why? Does God lead us into temptation? In the 23rd Psalm it says God leads us on paths of righteousness.

So, which is it? Actually, it is both.

God always leads us on the path of living righteously; living according to God's will for us and in ways that reflect God's love and mercy. But the selflessness that comes with righteousness also comes with temptations to put self-indulgence before love of neighbor. So, being led on the path of righteousness also leads us into encountering temptations we never would have if we weren't set on doing God's will.

After his baptism, Jesus was *driven* by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted. He was driven, not in the sense of being forced against his will, but in the sense of being compelled by a vision of God's will for him. The Devil's temptations were aimed at shaking Jesus' resolve and goading him into

diverting from God's will for his life. But Jesus' response to each temptation was to place his trust in God's Word.

If we take the promises made at our baptism seriously, we can't escape the fact that in our particular circumstances, we also are called to entrust ourselves to God's Word and fulfilling our role in God's plan in our time and in our own way.

With that calling there inevitably follows never-ending choices about whether we will consent to, or resist' that calling in the concrete details of each day. An accurate understanding of ourselves and of the anatomy of temptation tells us that the Spirit leads us on paths of justice, love, and righteousness; and it is in our nature to be susceptible to temptations to resist.

In this Lenten season we are invited—perhaps even driven—by the Spirit, to examine our own human frailty and to understand that the most significant temptations we face are not found in the things we are selfishly tempted to say YES to, when we should not. Rather, they are the times we are tempted to say NO to the challenges that accompany the life we are called to live as disciples of Jesus.

May we find ourselves led by the Spirit to be intentional during our forty days of Lent about immersing ourselves in God's Word, that we too may resist the tempting voices that beckon us to turn away from the Lord in order to walk some other path.