

“Empty Places”

Genesis 3:1-6 and Luke 4:1-13

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1st Sunday in Lent

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Today is the first Sunday in Lent, a season of preparation for Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and resurrection to new life. Since ancient times, this brief period of six weeks has been an opportunity for more intentional spiritual focus. It begins with making space in our lives to experience God’s presence.

How do we do that? From Jesus’ day on, Christians have found particular practices helpful in creating that spiritual and psychic space. As our denomination’s Office of Spiritual Formation of the PC(USA) beautifully puts it, “we *cooperate* with the work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit’s touch.” These spiritual disciplines include discernment, hospitality, prayer and contemplative silence, works of compassion and justice, Sabbath keeping and worship.” Each Wednesday morning prayer service and Sunday morning worship during Lent we will focus one of these practices. Today we turn to discernment.

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Luke 4:1-13: Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan [where he was baptized] and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him,’” Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash

your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

* * *

It is like some kind of cosmic do-over. Eve and Adam fall to temptation in the garden; Jesus resists the devil’s testing. The parallels are striking; as my friend and mentor Jon Walton puts it: “The devil came to Eve and asked her the haunting question, ‘Did God say...?’ Did God say you shouldn’t eat of those wonderful trees over there? Did God really say you would die?” Just so, the devil came to Jesus, quoting scripture, goading him “with the question, ‘Did God say you were his son? Go ahead and prove it!’”¹

The questions are the same; the end results are not. But why? Why does Jesus succeed where Eve and Adam fail? Both the first humans and Jesus are filled with God’s Spirit – God breathed that Spirit, that breath, into Adam after forming him from the dust. Nor is it that Jesus pulls a divine trick from his sleeve. He is as fully human as we are in this story. I’ve come to believe an enormous difference lies in Jesus’ practice of discernment. Let us look more closely now.

The first task of discernment is to recognize temptation for what it is ... which is easier said than done. One of the classic conversation starters for teaching children ethics is the hypothetical question, “If you found a wallet with \$1000 in the street, what would you do?” Few of us, alas, are faced with such easy moral lobs. The tests that get us are the ones we don’t see coming, the ones we might not even recognize because they sneak up on us. Such is the nature of evil. We’re told in Genesis that the devil in the Garden of Eden is “the subtlest of creatures.” The devil in Jesus’ temptation is, if anything, even more manipulative: a compassionate man who shows concern for Jesus’ hunger; a knowledgeable man who is familiar with God’s Word; a reasonable man who argues somewhat convincingly that the ends justify the means.²

It's almost like a magic trick. As my sister learned when her young son was taking up magic tricks, "Magic works because it fools the eye – you think you're seeing one thing, when it's really quite another." All the magician has to do is set things up so that "our own eyes play the tricks on us. We jump to conclusions based on what our minds think they already know."³ I think that's how temptation works.

Maybe I'm naïve, but I'm convinced that few of us set out to do bad things. Instead, our hearts play tricks on us. We think we're seeing one thing, but it's really quite another. We think we are seeing compassion, but then it turns out to be making excuses or enabling in the name of being nice. We think we know the truth when we hear it, but it ends up being marketing, or spin, or creative accounting. Evil rarely smashes us over the head with a two-by-four; it comes in the sleight of hand that makes sin look quite reasonable. Which is why discernment matters so very much.

I don't know anyone who sets out to have an affair. It starts by feeling lonely, and the secretary or old friend understands you better than your spouse does, and you find yourself thinking how good love is, and pretty soon you're in bed. I don't know anyone who prides themselves on gossiping. A word of sincere pity is said over coffee or cocktails, about so-and-so's drinking or their kid's problem, and then word spreads, but no one has the guts and real compassion that it takes to say something to the person's face, which might actually help instead of putting another nail in the coffin of a reputation. And I don't know anyone who feels great about their emotional weaknesses, but we ignore them or make excuses, as if it's no big deal that our perfectionism is giving us an ulcer, or our relentless criticism is demoralizing everyone around us, or our depression is sucking the life out of our marriage, or our self-absorption distracts us from things we could change if we felt like it.

We don't go out of our way to sin, *because we don't have to*. Sin comes to us, subtle, attractive, and easy. But it's not going to introduce itself to us; it almost always comes disguised, as something trivial, or even good and noble.

So how do we train ourselves to *recognize* temptation for what it is, so that we can resist it? How do we learn to see it when it's so subtle?

One of the keys to recognizing temptation is to cultivate a state of awareness ... a state of focus and attention that is not distracted or filled by myriad other things. An important factor in Jesus' victory over temptation is what I will call emptiness: a clarifying emptiness that lets us see temptations for the empty, ersatz pretenders that they really are.

Emptiness doesn't just happen; it requires intentional choice. Jesus has fasted 40 days in the wilderness before his trial, and he is in that wilderness alone. Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor likens the choice of emptiness an "Outward Bound for the soul." She says:

No one has to sign up for it, but if you do then you give up the illusion that you are in control of your life. You place yourself in the hands of strangers who ask you to do foolhardy things, like walk backwards over a precipice with nothing but a rope around your waist or climb a sheer rock face with your fingers and toes. But none of these is the real test, because while you are doing them you have plenty of people around and lunch in a cooler.

Barbara Brown Taylor says "the real test comes when you go solo":

The strangers put you out all by yourself in the middle of nowhere and wish you luck for the next 24 hours. That is when you find out who you are. That is when you find out what you really miss and what you are really afraid of. Some people dream about their favorite food. Some long for a safe room with a door to lock and others just wish they had a pillow, but they all find out what their pacifiers are – the habits, substances or surroundings they use to comfort themselves, to block out pain and fear.

Without those things they are suddenly exposed, like someone addicted to painkillers whose prescription has just run out. It is hard. It is awful. It

is necessary, to encounter the world without anesthesia, to find out what life is like with no comfort but God. I am convinced that 99 percent of us are addicted to something, whether it is eating, shopping, blaming or taking care of other people. The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone.

That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying. Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick our pacifiers into our mouths and suck for all we are worth. They do not nourish us, but at least they plug the hole.⁴

What pacifiers do you reach for? Some are obvious and ridiculous – like my obsession with checking email on my iPhone every half hour, or my dependence on Spider Solitaire when I’m stuck writing. Some are obvious – at least to everyone around us - and quite serious – like Tiger Woods’ sexual dependence on women to make him feel good. But other things are hard even to *see*, for they are hidden and perverse, things like blaming others for our problems or taking care of people overmuch, things like our inexplicably relentless sabotage of self-regard –by being unreliable, by habitually failing at things we say we will do.

Lent offers the rare chance to wean ourselves off of our pacifiers. Giving up things for Lent isn’t a children’s exercise of seeing whether you can resist chocolate for 40 days. It’s a *spiritual* discipline of living with the emptiness: not filling our boredom or loneliness or fear or insecurity with our usual stoppers, but living with our emptiness, experiencing those feelings, even when they scare the daylights out of us, and allowing our discomfort to lead us to our even deeper need for God. Allowing our emptiness to help us discern temptations for what they are – corrupt, and ugly, and futile, so that we turn instead to the rich presence of the Lord. Allowing our emptiness to help us see flattery and lies for what they are, and reach instead for the way, the truth and

the life Jesus offers us. Allowing our emptiness to make space for God, who longs to fill us with the Spirit again, with love and courage and real life, abundant life, which can never be taken away. Amen.

Come Down, O Love Divine
(Hymn following the sermon)

Come down, O Love divine, seek out this soul of mine
And visit it with Your own ardor glowing;
O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear,
And kindle it, Your holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn, till earthly passions turn
To dust and ashes in its heart consuming;
And let Your glorious light shine ever on my sight,
And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

And so the yearning strong with which the soul will long
Shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess God's grace till Love creates a place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling.

¹“Between the Garden and the Wilderness,” preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, DE, 3/8/87. Walton is currently pastor of First Presbyterian Church, New York, NY.

² cf. *Stages on the Way*, the Iona Community, Wild Goose Publishing

³ Karen Chakoian, speaking of her son learning magic tricks in “I Once Had Sight But Now I See,” preached at Central Presbyterian Church, Des Moines, IA, 7/30/95

⁴ “Settling for Less,” *The Christian Century*, 2/18/98