

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
TEMPTATIONS
Luke 4:1-13
February 21, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

It is not enough to have a worthy goal. Choosing the wrong *means* can undermine the noblest *end*. Short-cuts have always been a temptation in the religious life. Believing in an all-powerful and loving God, we look for quick and easy ways of healing our hurts and solving our problems. But we are to work out our salvation through Christ who works within us, learning patience, conquering selfishness, and striving for wholeness.

The temptations of Jesus in the desert were a powerful struggle over how Jesus would conduct his mission to the world. He chose not to bribe people with bread, or conquer them with power, or impress them with miracles. He chose to win them through sacrificial love.

Our moments of achievement and recognition are often followed by times of trial and testing. The temptation ordeal of Jesus came after his baptism. His moment of affirmation, when he was endorsed by God and John the Baptist, was followed by severe testing. The challenge was for Jesus to decide how he would pursue his mission. When we have set a goal for ourselves, we must determine how we will proceed. There are usually several possible ways. Which is best? Which is right? Even when the goal is clear, decisions remain about how to accomplish it.

In the desert with the devil, Jesus was tempted in three ways to use his power to advance his cause. The appeals were not for Jesus to do something other than what he would attempt to do, but to do it in ways that were at odds with his character and his higher purpose. Jesus had a mission that would begin with the people of his own time and place. He would need to find ways to draw them to him. The devil offered ingenious and attractive ways of doing this.

The first temptation was an appeal to Jesus' own hunger and to the poverty of the people. Turning stones to bread would win Jesus an instant and enthusiastic following. Most people in Palestine subsisted on a meager and inadequate diet. The proposed miracle, however, would cast Jesus as a Bread Messiah, which would make his mission seem one-dimensional. Later, when Jesus fed the five thousand, he found that many of the people cared nothing about his spiritual purpose but only about getting more food. Jesus rejected the devil's suggestion, and quoted words from Deuteronomy as his reason: *"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"*

The second temptation, according to Luke's Gospel, was the invitation to have worldly power by worshiping the devil. All the kingdoms of the world were shown to Jesus *"in a moment of time."* The devil said these kingdoms were his to bestow on Jesus, all their authority and glory, if Jesus would but worship him. Jesus again responded with words of scripture: *"It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'"* (Dt 6:13)

The third temptation was the devil's appeal to Jesus to use his unique powers to overwhelm the people with an act of unprecedented awe and wonder. On the pinnacle of Jerusalem's temple, the devil suggested Jesus throw himself down. Here the tempter used scripture: *"It is written, 'God will give his angels charge over you, to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'"* (Ps 91:11-12) This would indeed be a spectacular feat, the sort of thing people would talk about forever. Once more, however, Jesus refused the devil's invitation, and did so with words from scripture: *"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."* (Dt 6:16) At this point the devil departed to wait for a better time.

"The more things change," it is said, "the more they remain the same." It is certainly true that, despite the vast changes that have transformed our world since the time of Jesus, some things have deceptively remained the same. Temptation is every bit as much a part of life today as in the ancient world. Evil does not have to be personalized and visible to be powerful and persuasive. Evil is insidious and knows precisely where and when to strike us with its temptations. Any person who is not vigilant may become a victim of evil's dark and wily ways.

Even Jesus' specific temptations are not outdated. They are still on stage, though in different costumes and masks. There is a definite sense in which Jesus' temptations are our temptations, too.

The first temptation of Jesus, to turn stones to bread, was the temptation of basic human appetites and hungers. The watchword of the commercial world has long been "Give People What They Want." The national and world economies depend on satisfying human hungers and thirsts, be they base or respectable. All of us continually face temptations to yield to the compelling voices of our lower nature. Many human appetites are normal and nourishing, but some are demeaning and even deadly. When confronted by these temptations we should remember the words of Jesus, who said that true life does not consist of satisfying physical desires but of seeking the higher things of the spirit. The restlessness in the human heart is not for gratification but for God.

The second temptation of Jesus, to worship the devil and gain the world, was the temptation of power. Power has always been seductive, and many people have understood the meaning of life as the getting and keeping of power. None of us will be tempted by ownership of all the kingdoms of the world, as Jesus was, but we are all tempted to use whatever power we have selfishly and to seek greater power. Jesus said God alone has true power and God's power is expressed in love. Our powerful and loving God alone is worthy of our worship and our service.

The third temptation of Jesus, to amaze the multitudes with some spectacular feat, was the temptation to manipulate people instead of respect and love them. We all know the temptation to use others for our own selfish purposes. What is more tragic than when one person betrays the love of another by taking advantage of that love for unfeeling and selfish reasons? Jesus said we should not put God to a test. Neither should we use the love of another person to gain some advantage.

When we are tempted, we should remember Jesus' example, and we should trust in his ever-present love and power.

Corporations and institutions, whether they are economic or educational, political or humanitarian, tend to pursue their goals on the basis of feasibility studies. What is possible is measured against what is practical. The predictable is balanced against the uncontrollable. Costs are weighed against profits. For all its

practicality, this kind of planning tends to oppose the virtues of idealism and heroism.

If you are ready to experience the incomparable power of God, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.