

Trinity Episcopal Church
Lawrence, Kansas
Sermon for February 21, 2010
The First Sunday in Lent ~ Year C
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

In an insightful comic strip, "Frank 'N Ernest," the cartoonist has Frank say to Ernest: "I don't mind fleeing temptation, so long as I can leave a forwarding address." That hits home, doesn't it? Because in our common struggle with temptation, we usually leave the door open a crack for a return visit. Let's face it, some sins we like better than others. And while we know they should be resisted, we don't cut off our fantasies about them completely, just in case we want to entertain them later on a dull day when we feel the need to spice up life a bit. We may flee temptation today but, as Frank said to Ernest, we like to leave a forwarding address.

That's how we get into trouble with temptation. You just can't leave that forwarding address. Regardless of how attractive the sin may be, it must be dealt with decisively at the moment, broken off, and given no future encouragement. Jesus, who was tempted as we are, dealt with temptation that way.

As a young man, he was led into the wilderness. There, the devil met him and tempted him. It is a tradition in the church to begin the forty days of Lent with Jesus' forty days of testing in the wilderness. The beginning is always a dangerous time! At the beginning of our adult lives, for instance, when one is a young adult, that one is most preoccupied with, "who am I?" This is the greatest temptation of all, the temptation to be someone other than the real you.

The who am I identity question is behind this strange, shadowy meeting with the devil in the wilderness. And I suppose many of you can relate to Jesus in his temptation. Have you ever felt tempted to walk down a path toward a future that is not really yours? ...Well, who are you, anyway? And who tells you who you are?

Who tells Jesus who he is? At his baptism and there on the mount of transfiguration, it was the divine voice from heaven telling him and those about him, "this is my only begotten Son." So, here, fasting in the wilderness is Emmanuel, Messiah, God's only begotten.

But what kind of Messiah? What kind of God are we getting here in Jesus? Luke helps us to see. "If you are...let's see some sign of it." hunger/bread...permanent political solution/worship of satan...struggle to believe/miraculous feat. If God really wanted to help us, why did he send a Savior like Jesus who, when confronted by our need, just stands there and quotes Scripture? If God is love and God is power, why does God just stand there? Keep that in mind as we ponder this strange story of the temptation - if you are the Son of God, why don't you act like it and do something?

The Bible finds uninteresting the modern infatuation "Is there a God?" The Bible's chief interest is, "What kind of God is there?" Adam and Eve and the tree...Hebrew Children in the Exodus and manna...So, when you hear Satan taunt Jesus with "if you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread," remember that you have heard this somewhere before. Temptation is a function of hunger. Is God for us or not? they asked Moses. Let's have bread as proof that God is our kind of God, i.e., a God who responds to our hungry need. What good is religion or praying or getting out of bed and being here in church on a cold Sunday, if it doesn't yield results in your life?" "We have forsaken everything and followed you," the disciples told Jesus. Now, what's in it for us?

Satan knows, nobody serves God for nothing. Most of us know this. You know that bad things happen to good people as well as good things happen to bad people. There is no cause-effect relationship between our love for God and the good or bad that comes our way in life. To do so would be crass, to call God friend, only as a means of putting the make on God. God is not some cosmic Santa Claus who exists to shower us with what we want.

But if God can't give us always what our hearts desire, can't God give us a sign? What's the harm in a sign? Anything would be better than this silent, sign-less, two-faced universe. A believer looks at a butterfly emerging from a cocoon and says, "See, there's a God!" A nonbeliever looks at the same cocoon and says, "See, there's your universe working just fine with no need of fairy tales about God."

And you know the world seems to be set up that way. You can read it as: This is my Father's world. Or: This is an amazing series of cosmic accidents. Why not a clear, unambiguous sign? Remember, we're not speaking selfishly here. It's not just for our sake that we would like God to do something, to take a stronger hand in the world, to show a sign. It's for God's sake.

Well, who do we say that he is? Who is this God, and who is his only Son, whom we are to love with heart, soul, and mind? And Jesus turns our question back upon us! Who is this Satan, this demonic tempter who is bent on tripping me up, tempting me to walk a path other than the one God has commanded? Don't you see? The Satan, the tempter, the obstacle, is one of his own disciples! The ones who offer him the greatest temptation, who are desperate to transform him, are his own people - us. The temptation he resists is us - Jesus own people who, rather than follow on his terms, attempt to make him over into our own image of who God ought to be than to follow him as the God of the Scriptures say he is.

The good news today is that he is able to resist temptation in the wilderness or here in this church. Get behind me, Satan! He not only *quotes* scriptures, he *lives* them, embodies, in his own life, the God of whom the Scriptures speak. Later, they tempted him even as he hung on the cross: "If you are the Chosen of God, save yourself." This time, he just hung there. Sometimes, when we ask him to be our kind of God rather than the God he is, he doesn't rebuke us or bless us, he is silent.

The good news arising out of his temptation is that he will go ahead and be God. This Messiah is not pliable. He's not our "buddy." If he would go on and save us, he must first be able to hold out against us and our demands. He will go ahead and be a real God, not some projection of our own egos. After all, we pray, not our will, but yours be done!

Don't just do something, Jesus, stand there. Stand there for us, faithful when we are not, true to Scripture. Be the God we don't deserve and didn't ask for. Despite us, don't just do something, stand there.

Some companions of the Venerable Bede in northeast England came to him one day and said, "We are harassed by many temptations, which appeal to us so often and so strongly that they give us no rest. You do not seem to be troubled in this way, and we should like to know your secret. Don't these temptations that harass our souls ever come to you?"

The old saint listened, smiled, and said, "I, too, know something of the temptations you speak of. But when they come knocking at the door of my heart, I always answer, 'This place is occupied, go back where you came from,' and that is an end of it." He left no forwarding address. He just stood there.