

Power in Weakness©

Luke 4:1-13

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Since this first Sunday of Lent – and really all of the Season of Lent – focuses on temptation and repentance, I thought I would share these stories with you. The first one is an illustration about repentance. It's been around a while so you may have heard it before, but it goes like this:

Once upon a time there was a painter. One day he made a deal to paint a woman's house for her for \$1000. But when he got started and realized how much time and effort it was going to take to paint the whole house, he decided that he needed to do something to increase his profit on the job.

And so, since the woman didn't really keep an eye on him when he painted, what he did was he began to mix thinner in with the paint. After all, he figured, paint was expensive. And by adding in thinner, he was able to make a can of paint go farther and thus lower his costs and increase his profit.

After a while, when he saw how much money he was saving, he kept adding in more and more thinner. By the time the house was finished, he was proud of himself. He had turned a tidy little profit for himself, and the woman would never know what he'd done.

That is, until he was just starting to clean up and put his ladders away and it started to rain. As the rain poured down, the paint, with all that thinner in it, began to wash off the woman's house.

Finally, when the rain stopped and the sun came out, a voice from the clouds boomed out and said, "Repaint, and thin no more!"¹

This second illustration especially focuses on temptation. It seems to imply that the only reason we resist temptation is if no one is watching.

One day the students at a certain seminary were going through the cafeteria line. At one point in the serving line there was a big bowl of apples with a sign posted next to it that said, "Take only one apple. God is watching you."

Well, further on down the line, there was a tray of chocolate chip cookies. One of the students quickly scribbled a sign and left it there that said, "Take as many cookies as you want. God's busy watching the apples."

¹ Illustrations are from Goodpreacher.com, C. Edward Bowen, Crafton United Presbyterian Church, Pittsburg, PA, "What Are You Hungry For?"

These are funny illustrations that speak to the way we humans are tempted, at times, to sneak a little something for our own benefit. Both of these stories indicate that if no one is watching, it's easy and maybe harmless, to give in to that temptation.

So, what are the things that tempt you most? Where are your weakest areas? Is it in something you want to eat or drink that you know might not be good for you ... might not be the healthiest thing for your body?

Is it, in fact, something that involves money – trying to help yourself a little more?

Is it telling a little white lie to keep from being embarrassed or getting in trouble with mom or dad, or a boss? There are so many things that we could think of that we might consider a temptation. But let's look at the temptations of Jesus. Even the Son of God was tempted and how he responded was important for the rest of his ministry on earth!

Remember, Jesus had just been baptized in the river Jordan, by John. And he had this amazing affirmation with the voice of God saying, "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

And then, Luke tells us, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit out into the wilderness for 40 days. This was a time for fasting and for prayer. I've spoken a little already in this early Lenten season about fasting – that is, giving up things.

A serious fast is not eating for a period of time. Some people decide to fast from eating food, as Jesus did. I had friends at the Upper Room who fasted every Friday, all day until the evening and then they only ate a small vegetarian meal. It wasn't to show off – my friend never spoke of his fast, except once he shared with me when I was asking about fasting.

Some people give up one or two things, but I find that not to be a true fast because, while I might miss sugar (if that is what I decide to give up), I am not going hungry. I am not feeling hunger pains in my stomach or feeling weakness in my body.

It is not really that hard to give up one thing. It certainly is okay and admirable to make a sacrifice from something you love but it probably isn't going to cause the kinds of needs Jesus had in the wilderness.

We don't know if Jesus' fast was from not eating or drinking anything for 40 days. Luke says, "He ate nothing at all." So that could be quite the case.

But, I find it a little difficult to take that as a literal truth because he was human and humans need a certain amount of water and some kind of sustenance.

Perhaps it was just a small amount of water and food once a day ... just enough to keep him alive yet still fulfilling the discipline of a radical fast. The purpose of a fast for spiritual reasons (which is why we do any of the things we do or let go of or add for Lent) is to empty ourselves of everything we are hungry for.

Hopefully, we begin to realize that what we are truly hungry for, is God. And we allow ourselves to know that we are weak and fragile and that we are completely dependent on our Creator.

Fasting and prayer go together. It is in this spiritual empty place that we are open for discernment – for new vision, clearer understanding of what God wants us to be or do.

Of course, the danger of being empty is that we are always vulnerable to the temptation of filling ourselves with something besides God. And that, my friends, is what we saw the devil trying to do with Jesus.

Oh, he is cunning! In fact, he is probably a handsome dude. He most likely comes to Jesus as a caring, compassionate – all about helping you out – kind of being.

Sometimes it's difficult to discern whether you are facing something truly from God or something that is the opposite – whatever you wish to call it. The point is, temptation usually looks really good. That's why it's a temptation. If it didn't look good, it wouldn't be that hard!

So, Luke tells us the devil tempted Jesus throughout the 40 days of his wilderness fast. But then, he watches and waits until just the right time to lay on the big temptations – he waits until the weakest moment comes for Jesus. At the end of the 40 days Jesus body is famished! He is hungry and thirsty. He is physically weak and exhausted. Jesus truly was human and he truly experienced these physical things we experience. Otherwise, how could it make that much difference? How could we relate to him?

And then the devil strikes!

He said to Jesus, hitting him right in the stomach, right where he was hurting most: 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'

Whoa! That would be quite a temptation when you *are* the Son of God (God just told him that, before he started this fast). If you are the Son of God you surely have the power to turn a simple rock into bread. And to be so hungry you could almost eat the stone *as is* ... it would be tempting, for sure.

But Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." Matthew's account of Jesus' temptations says that Jesus added, "But ... on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Jesus knows there is a much deeper hunger that needs to be filled with something more than just food. And he knows these words of God, and has meditated on them enough that he is able to withstand the temptation to give in for a full stomach.

But, the devil wasn't ready to throw in the towel. Not quite yet.

Then the devil took Jesus to a high place and showed him all the kingdoms of the world. He thought he could convince Jesus that they belonged to him, the devil. He said, "I'll give *you* the glory and all the authority over these kingdoms. All you have to do is – **WORSHIP ME!**

Ah, *this* is where it is so important to stay close to the heart of God and to be filled with God only. Because, if we don't, we can so easily be misled. We can get things all whopper-jawed in our minds and somehow get to thinking crazy thoughts.

We can allow that "stinkin thinkin' as they call it in the 12 step programs, to get into our heads and we start believing what is the opposite of truth, because we can so easily be tempted into desiring and thinking we deserve to have power. Somehow we can justify what we do.

"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him," Jesus said. The quest for power is a straight road for worshipping self over God. If you've got power, why would you need God?

Finally, the devil took Jesus up to Jerusalem, up to the pinnacle of the temple and he dared him to throw himself down, testing God's word that said that the angels themselves would catch him and not let him be killed.

And Jesus, again quoted Scripture, saying, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

And, Luke says, the devil left Jesus then, until an opportune time. He did not win this time. Jesus did not sink into his cunning temptations. But that did not mean the devil was finished. He would be waiting and watching for another one of those weak moments.

Thing is ... that devil didn't get it. Jesus' weakness was where his power dwelt. In the weakness that Jesus had allowed himself to develop through fasting, prayer, emptying himself – he gave himself to the power of God.

And Scripture promises that in God, all things are possible and that in our weakness we are made strong. We are strong when we depend on the Lord. We are able to stand fast and persevere and resist temptation when we lean on him completely, when we empty ourselves of whatever false power we have convinced ourselves we have.

When we realize that we need God for our very breath, for our steps to be guided, for the will not to give in, only then, in our weakness, do we really have strength.

The song, Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong.

That song teaches us as a little child that we can come to Jesus in our weakness and depend on him to be strong.

Lent is about learning to empty ourselves as Jesus did so that we might be filled with the Holy Spirit, filled to the brim with God's love and forgiveness and strength. That, in Him, we will resist the temptation to be our own God, because that would be our undoing.

May our Lenten journey be one of courage and love and focus on the one who calls us to the wilderness once again for our own 40 days of fasting – whatever that may look like. And may we remember that while we are reflecting on our own relationship with the One who truly is our God, we are not alone.

We are brothers and sisters in Christ, walking this wilderness path together. We have one another; we pray for each other and we give support to one another, never judging, always loving.

Never be afraid of weakness. Because, in our weakness, we find real power in Christ, our Savior.

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