

The First Sunday in Lent  
February 17, 2013

Deuteronomy 26:1-11  
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16  
Romans 10:8b-13  
LUKE 4:1-13

## “LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION”

Given that this is the First Sunday in Lent, and a key focus of our scriptures and collect today is *temptation*, and it's President's Day weekend, I thought I'd share a story about Abraham Lincoln. It may be apocryphal, but it's a good story, and it's pertinent.

When Lincoln was in Congress, he was holding office hours in his district in Illinois when a rather disreputable businessman came to see him. Congressman Lincoln invited him into his office and listened to the man offer “a certain consideration” for the congressman's help in obtaining a federal contract for him. Lincoln poured him a drink and then said no, he didn't do things that way, but was there anything else the man wanted to talk about?

The man said no, this contract was really what he wanted to talk about, and he doubled his offer.

Lincoln stood up, walked around the room, told a funny story, then sat down and said no, that wasn't the way he did things, was there anything else the man wanted to talk about?

The man said no, and doubled his offer again.

Lincoln stood up to his full 6' 4" height, picked the man up by the back of his shirt collar and the back of his belt, carried him out of his office and threw him down the courthouse steps. The man picked himself up, spat gravel out of his mouth, dusted himself off and said, “Congressman Lincoln, I don't get it. I offered you so much, you poured me a drink. I doubled my offer and you told me a funny story. I doubled my offer again and you threw me down the courthouse steps.”

Lincoln looked at him and said, “Every man has his price, and you were getting awfully close to mine.”

My point is that *temptations tempt the best of us*. That's why they're called temptations. Jesus was tempted too. If anyone says, "I've never been tempted," well, I wonder.

Our reading this morning from Deuteronomy directly addresses two very real temptations that are very much with us. One is the temptation to believe that freedom is something to which we are entitled or which is "just part of the natural order of things" and takes no effort on our part or grace on God's part. And another is the temptation to believe that prosperity is solely the result of one's own brilliance and hard work and that there is no one to thank except for oneself.

The Israelites who came out of slavery in Egypt into freedom *knew* -- though they did not always express their gratitude -- that their freedom was due to the unmerited direct intervention of God in their lives. Without God's help, they would have been ground to dust by the power of the Egyptian Empire. The first Israelites to raise crops in the Promised Land *knew* -- though they did not always express their gratitude -- that the reason they were able to farm productively in what Deuteronomy calls "a land flowing with milk and honey" instead of scratching out a bare existence as nomads in the Wilderness of Sinai (and that with a lot of help from God) was the gracious hand of God.

Therefore, Moses is recorded as prophetically describing the ceremony we heard in this reading this morning in which *each generation* "owns" the experience of having been brought out of slavery into freedom and out of poverty into plenty by God and each generation gives thanks to God by systematically giving to God *every year* some of the "first fruits" of their labors. Not the smallest bill in their wallet, not coins found in their sofa cushions, not what was left at the end of the month or the end of the year, but some of the *first* fruits of their labors.

Otherwise, people would be *tempted* to look at the freedom-filled country they lived in and at the prosperity of which they had some share, large or small, and say, "I did this all by myself." What respect for God would such a person show? What care for God's creation would such a person show?

Do you think anyone today is tempted to look at their W-2s and say, "I did this all by myself?" Do you think anyone is tempted to look at our country, our planet, our universe and say, "I'm a self-made man," or "I'm a self-made woman. I have no one to thank but myself"?

In our reading from The Letter to the Romans today, St. Paul speaks three times about the possibility for someone to be “saved.” The concept of “being saved” makes some people uncomfortable, especially those who think they can do everything themselves and don’t need God’s help or anyone else’s, thank you very much. And there are those who think that God is so “loving” -- and permissive -- that *everyone* is “saved” -- Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot -- *everyone* -- so there is in fact nothing we can do to *prevent* our being “saved” and therefore, naturally, nothing we need to do or receive to make salvation possible.

Neither approach has anything to do with Christianity.

The first person has given into the temptation of spiritual grandiosity and self-sufficiency, a temptation which is still with us in the 21st Century.

The second person either believes that God has no moral standards at all, or believes that God is so “brutally nice” that God will *force* people into bliss whether they want it or not. If you want a depiction of how the real God does not do this, read the final book in C.S. Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia series, The Last Battle -- the banquet scene. Aslan invites people to joy but does not require it.

The first person I described believes that he or she *is* god who can save him or herself; the second person believes in a “god” of her or his own imagination, not the real God as God has *revealed* God’s self to us in the Bible. Both have yielded to the *temptation to invent* a so-called “god” which suits their own intellectual or spiritual whims, not to kneel down in awe before the *real* God, who graciously offers to save those who repent, believe and are *liberated* from sin and death by being *servants* of God and so experience new life with God in limitless quality and quantity far beyond human imaging, never mind human creating.

In our Gospel reading, we hear of Jesus himself who, as the Proper Preface for today says, “was tempted in every way as we are yet did not sin.” How, one might well ask, could even Satan tempt *Jesus* ? What could Satan possibly offer that Jesus did not already have? Ah, that’s not the only kind of temptation Jesus -- or we -- have to face.

Satan tempted Jesus *to use his own power just for his own benefit*: to turn a stone into bread to feed only himself, to gain earthly power for himself by worshiping Satan, to make a spectacular self-serving display of miraculous power by jumping off of the ball in

Times Square on New Year's Eve -- uh, of jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem -- and not falling. Jesus said "No", "No", and "No", and then he did not "throw Satan down the courthouse steps" -- these things are not always handled so easily -- but Jesus allowed Satan to depart, *knowing he would be back* to tempt him again.

Now we may think, "We can't relate to Jesus' temptations. We don't have power." Oh yes we do.

I remember vividly the first morning I woke up after we brought our newborn son home from the hospital. I felt the weight of *responsibility* for that tiny life. The flip side of responsibility is *power*: I only realize in retrospect how much *power* we had to shape his life for good or ill. Now, we all have the power to shape the lives of others -- and not just newborn babies. *We*, each of us, have the power to shape how we interact with every person we come into contact with each day. Are we gracious, snide, condescending, encouraging, careful listeners, reactive or what? *We have* power. And trust me, Satan tempts us all to make every encounter all about *us* so that we start to pretend that that the world revolves around us -- or *should*.

Of course, the greatest temptation is to believe that we can't be tempted. Believing that either reveals a stunning lack of self-awareness or willing self-delusion.

People *can*, by the grace of God, *resist* temptations. Sometimes. And when we do give in to temptation and do the wrong thing (or skip doing the right thing), we *can* then resist the temptation to try to cover it up, or pretend it didn't count, or that God doesn't know, or a hundred other follow-up temptations and instead admit our fault, apologize, ask forgiveness, make amends and move on.

Simple? Yes. Hard? [Pause.] It sure can be.

But it all depends on what we want.

Lincoln was not re-elected to Congress. (Maybe he just didn't "fit in.")

But there are more wondrous opportunities in this world *and* beyond it than being elected to Congress, or *achieving* all sorts of things.

To experience these wonders, we need to ask first (prompted by Deuteronomy), are we willing to *really* thank God for what we have *already* received?

Second, do we know that we *need* to be saved to experience life in its fullness forever, and knowing that, do we *want* to be saved?

And third, do we recognize temptations as a life-long struggle in many contexts, and are we willing to humbly ask God's help to resist them *and* not subsequently yield to the temptation to be proud of our abilities to resist temptation? (I told you spiritual growth is hard.)

O.K., team? Let's do Lent. On into the wilderness, to face the scariest opponent of all: ourselves.

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