

Sermon for Sunday, January 25, 1976, Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"IF GOD HAS ONE HAND--GUESS WHO HAS THE OTHER"

St. Matthew 4:1-11

Text: "And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry, and the tempter came..." --St. Matthew 4:2,3

When Jesus fasted forty days and nights and then encountered the devil, he was all alone. Therefore, the only way the Bible writer could know about what happened out there in the desert was for Jesus to share his experience with his disciples. So, when he came to tell them about it--when he shared with them the profound reality of the struggle that raged across the battleground of his soul, he told it in vivid form. As he tells the story, we see the devil spring to life. We see him standing before Jesus, we hear the honeyed tones of his persuasive voice, we feel the tug of his sly offers, we are dazzled by the glitter of his promises. We are held spellbound by an intense drama of the inner conflicts that rage back and forth across the heart of Christ. So it is that Jesus conveys to us the deep truth, the profound reality of temptation.

In this event we learn two things about temptation. First we learn about its nature and second we discover something of the form of temptation. Let's look first at the nature of temptation. The first thing we discover is that it is pervasive. If something is pervasive it means that it permeates and passes through all the parts. It means to spread throughout the entire extent of a thing. So, when a thing is pervasive, it is everywhere; it means there is no place where it is not.

Now, temptation is pervasive. It is everywhere. There is no place where it is not. The Bible says that, "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." So, God had him by one hand, but guess who had him by the other! And that means that even when you are close to God, the devil is tagging along. Well, that's an important lesson to learn. You can't run away from the devil if he is always tagging along. And that means we simply have to learn to deal with him. Jesus was out doing holy exercises, but there was the devil. And the fact that we belong to the church, that we do good and holy things, doesn't mean the devil isn't around. Just when we aren't looking for him, suddenly there he is! Sometimes we begin to think the devil is dead or at least outside the sanctuary walls, or maybe next door visiting with our neighbors. But that is exactly what he isn't doing. If God has us by one hand, guess who is always holding the other? So, like it or not, no matter how hard we are trying to be good, that other guy holding our hand has to be dealt with.

The second thing we learn about the nature of temptation is this: it is always personal. Now, if someone had been able to take a picture of Jesus out there in the wilderness I don't think two people would have shown up on the film. What Jesus was experiencing was in his heart--it was an inner thing. Yet, for all of that, it was intensely personal. Now, I have never literally seen the devil. Several times I thought I had, but it only turned out to be one of the officers who was giving me a bad time! But I haven't seen a toothache either, have you? Yet, most of us have felt and experienced the painful power of an aching tooth. So it is with the devil. I have felt his hot breath on my soul; I have felt the power of his persuasion; I have felt the lure of his offers; I have seen the glitter of his promises. He is very real and very personal to me. I think that is what the

Bible means when it says, "The tempter came to him." It means that temptation is intensely personal. As St. Paul put it, we have to wrestle "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of the world." (Ephesians 6:12) So, the nature of temptation is that it is not only pervasive, it is personal--intensely so.

The third thing we learn about the nature of temptation is that it is also particular. Did you notice the temptations of Jesus in our Scripture this morning? Were they vague, diffused, generalized temptations or were they terribly specific and particular? You see, you can't be good or bad in general. You are either good or bad in particular. You can't say I'm going to be a good Christian (a general statement) and then say I'll cut church just this Sunday or gossip this once. (Like the lady who said, "I never say anything about anybody unless it is good. And boy, is this good!") You can't say you will be good in general but dislike that particular person or cheat just this once. So temptation is always to do some specific thing, some particular act. We don't defeat temptation in general, we have to beat it in particular.

The fourth thing we note about the nature of temptation is that it is private--it is terribly private and awfully lonely. Out there in the wilderness as Jesus contemplated what lay before him--all those painful years that would culminate in rejection and the agonizing tragedy of the cross--he was surely tempted to turn aside. As the writer of the book of Hebrews once put it, "He himself hath suffered being tempted..." (Hebrews 2:18) And that suffering was something he had to bear alone--nobody could share it with him. There was no one to share the suffering of decision, no one to share the agony of it. He was dreadfully alone with the might of hell pitted against him.

There are some things we cannot share. Once when I was in my late twenties, I had an operation. The doctors told me I had an inoperable and incurable malignancy. They handed me my death warrant. And dying is lonely business. No one can truly share it. There are your loved ones who care, friends who love you and are concerned but you and you alone are dying and no one can share that with you. You must face it alone. So with temptation in your soul. It is terribly private and awfully lonely. No one can make our decisions for us and that loneliness of the choice is ours. I suspect most of us here this morning know very well indeed the agonizing loneliness of the soul as we have wrestled with temptation. Yes, temptation is a private affair, for no one can make our decisions for us.

So that is the nature of temptation. It is pervasive, it is personal, it is particular and it is private. Let's look for a moment at the form of temptation as we see it in the temptation story of Jesus. Temptation wears many faces, it comes in many forms, but in the light of the temptations of Jesus I think we can group them under two broad categories. The first face that temptation wears is the face of doubt. This was the form of the first temptation of Jesus. Do you remember it? "If you are the son of God, turn these stones into bread." The devil was trying to make Jesus doubt who he was. Do you ever think, "I'm not good enough to be a Christian. God wouldn't ever accept anybody like me." Have you ever said, "Well, I've tried to be a Christian and failed. I might as well go ahead and do this evil thing." But listen! If Jesus is your Savior, you are the son of a King. You have the very power of God--His Holy Spirit--at work in your life. You have the authority of a son of God at your disposal. When you remember that, when you lay hold of the spiritual resources God gives you, you can face any temptation and overcome any evil desire. But when the devil makes you doubt that you are a son of God, you will surely stumble and fall.

But doubt has another face. It came in the second temptation. The devil challenges Jesus to jump off the temple and if God is who he says he is, he will bear him up in the hands of angels. And here the devil is trying to make Jesus doubt God. Have you ever doubted God when you prayed? Have you ever doubted him when pain or sickness or the death of a loved one came? When a job was lost, when a dream never materialized, when a marriage went awry, have you doubted God? But when we stop trusting God, when we quit relying on him, when we no longer believe he loves us, when we doubt that his will for us is good, then we begin to rely on ourselves--or others--or things--and the devil has us right where he wants us. Then he can do with us as he will.

So the first form of temptation is doubt--doubt that wears a face that causes us to question whether we are sons of God, doubt that wears a face which makes us question God and his loving goodness. The second form of temptation is desire. Do you remember how it happened? The devil showed Jesus the whole world and said he could have it if he would fall down and worship him. Would you, like Faust, have sold your soul to the devil to own it? Or do you remember what happened to Eve in the Garden of Eden? The Bible says, "and when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired...she took of the fruit thereof and did eat." (Genesis 3:6) Yes, "a tree to be desired..."

You and I know about desire, don't we? We know what it is to have our hearts set on things, our souls sick with desiring. Remember King Ahab in the Old Testament? He wanted the vineyard of Naboth, a poor neighbor. But Naboth wouldn't sell it because it was all he had. The Bible says that Ahab was vexed and sullen, "And he lay down on his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no food." (I Kings 21:4) Or there is the story of King David who saw Bathsheba and desired her in her heart. Yes, we know what it is like to be sick with desire and wanting. One cannot help but remember the words of Jesus, "For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (St. Matthew 16:26) And that is the trouble with temptation that comes in the form of desire, we may exchange treasures where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break through and steal for the sake of our very souls.

We have looked at the nature of temptation and the form of temptation. Let's look for a moment at the response to temptation. Do you remember how Jesus responded to temptation? He said, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." Here we are introduced to the principle of a higher attraction. Dr. Thomas Chalmers of Scotland was a famous preacher of days long since gone. Yet he preached a famous sermon that most seminary students today are required to read. It is entitled, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection." In that sermon he talks about how a new affection for God, a love for Jesus, has the power to expell old loves and old affections. It is said that the inspiration for the sermon happened this way: Dr. Chalmers was being driven somewhere one day in a pony cart. At a certain point in the road the driver drew his whip and gave the pony a pretty sharp whack. When Dr. Chalmers complained about the treatment of the animal, the driver replied, "Do you see that white post beside the road? This pony has a way of shying at it, so when we approach it, I always give him a touch of the whip to let him have something else to think about!" Yes, the expulsive power of a new affection--for when our hearts are full of God and our eyes fixed on Jesus, we don't have time to doubt or desire for the wrong things.

When God has you by one hand, the devil has the other. Who wins out in your life depends on whose hand you hold on to. There is a famous Greek legend that illustrates this for us very well. It is the story of the Argonauts who had to sail by the southern shore of Italy where the sirens lived. They were beautiful in voice but evil in soul. They came to the shore and sang as ships sailed by. Their voices were so sweet the sailors would turn towards land and their boats would be wrecked on the rocks hidden by the water. As the Argonauts sailed by this dangerous place they had on board the famous poet and singer Orpheus. According to the legend his voice was such that lions and tigers would come and crouch at his feet, rocks were softened, great oaks were moved from their places. As the Argonauts arrived at the place of peril, the sirens came out and sang their sweetest. But the Argonauts only laughed and rowed steadily on. Every day they had heard the sound of the music of Orpheus. For men who had heard the sweetest sounds in the world, the inferior music of the sirens could hold no attraction for them.

So it is for you and for me. When we love Jesus only--when our eyes are fixed on him--no doubt and no desire can have a higher attraction. You see, when God has you by one hand the devil has the other. Which hand will you hold on to? Well, that depends on you. But if you put Jesus in your heart and in the center of your life, your love for him will make you hold on to God's hand. Our sermon title this morning asks a question, "If God has one hand, guess who has the other?" That's really not a hard question to answer. The hard question to answer is this: whose hand will you hold on to? And that, you see, depends on you.

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