

LEAD US NOT...BUT DELIVER US

LUKE 4:1-13

Ever wake up in the morning and feel like going wild, doing something radically different, subversive even? I had this feeling about a month ago when I began mapping out sermons for 2010 when I came to this Sunday. Between the Baptism of the Lord and the beginning of Lent, the Lectionary leads us through the Gospel of Luke. Well, sort of. This past Sunday, we went to the Gospel for John for a wedding at Cana. Now we return to the regularly scheduled Gospel already in progress.

If we follow the Lectionary, we go from Jesus being baptized to changing water into wine to Jesus beginning to teach in the synagogue without him ever being tempted by the devil. If only a life of obedience were that simple. To follow this trajectory would be like being ordained without being examined or being purified without passing through fire. Sure, we could save it till Lent, but by then, I will be preaching Psalms that Jesus may have prayed as he followed a path that led to charges of blasphemy and sedition.

So in an effort to be charged with blasphemy and sedition, I decided that the Spirit was leading me to do something wild and radically different, something subversive even, and preach the story told between Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his Galilean ministry in Luke's Gospel, and we will catch up next Sunday (because, in truth, this Sunday and next Sunday's readings belong together). Being wild, radically different and subversive never felt so good! It makes me want to crank up the Skynyrd and scream, "Roll Tide!"

Now for a second confession (oh, this feels good...public confession...you should try it sometime...maybe it would help attendance): the explicit reference to the Lord's Prayer is intentionally deceptive. The subject of this sermon is the first temptation of the Christ following his baptism (or his ordination and installation, if you will), but we will eventually arrive at the Lord's Prayer.

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3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C, January 24, 2010*

I find the notion of temptation irresistible. What is the nature of temptation? What is the nature of Christ's temptation? What is the nature of ours? Christ may share our nature, and yet since he is both God and human being, we share only half of his. Who tempts? How? Why? What tempts you? What tempts me? Relax. I promise not to start naming names, listing sins that I would commit if nobody were watching or asking you to do so either.

Is every person and everything that tempts us necessarily evil? Somewhere along the way, somebody somewhere tempted you to go to church. Now here you are (perhaps to the chagrin of the person who invited you to that "other" church in the first place). Like Jesus, you may be baptized. Like Jesus, you will be led into temptation; and the answers to the questions "By whom?" and "For what purpose?" will make all the difference.

American humorist Mark Twain notes that, "Moralists and philosophers have adjudged those who throw temptation in the way of erring, equally guilty with those who are thereby led into evil." Isn't it possible to make an honest mistake and be delivered from evil? Isn't it possible to be tempted to eat one-half dozen jelly-filled doughnuts still warm from the oven and to give into that temptation without thinking of one's self as evil (which, by the way, may be enough to send one back to the drive-thru for another half dozen doughnuts the next time that the "hot now"-sign is flashing)? I probably should not say anything else about doughnuts, because I do not want to lead you into temptation.

What I am saying is temptation is not intrinsically evil. One may be enticed, allured or persuaded to make decisions that are acceptable and pleasing in God's sight.

In Luke, the problem with temptation is the one who tempts. Who is he and what he strives to do is stand between Jesus Christ and the ministry to which God calls him.

But consider this: the devil is not the only tempter in the story. In the beginning, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returns from Jordan and is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Wait. The Holy Spirit is

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not supposed to lead human beings into the wilderness. The Holy Spirit is supposed to lead them/us out, and yet this is not what the Holy Spirit does in this story.

Is it just me? Or does the church seem to have more and more difficulty acknowledging that God places human beings in difficult situations throughout the biblical narrative? I suppose that we are reluctant to field questions about where God is during an earthquake or an aftershock in the wilderness of Haiti, and it is almost impossible to fathom that the Spirit may have led human beings there. Normally, this is how it works: when something spectacular happens, God is given glory, and when bad things happen, the church edits God out of the story or blames it on the devil.

Is God sovereign or not? If God is, the Spirit may lead us into places where we would rather not be, and if God is gracious, merciful and just, then the Spirit will lead us---or at least our people---out of the wildernesses in which we find ourselves.

But what about Haiti? A sad story has become sadder. A hungry people has become hungrier. A thirsty people has become thirstier, and a congregation in Tuscaloosa, Alabama does not have any problem relating to a jelly-filled doughnut reference in a sermon. Something about this seems unjust, because it is. Who has more in common with Jesus?

Jesus eats nothing at all for forty days, and Luke says that he is famished. The devil tempts him to think more of his body than he does of spirit, and Jesus says, "Look, there is more to life than bread." The devil offers Jesus the world. Apparently, it is his to offer, which may explain why earthquakes devastate the people of Haiti. Jesus is less interested in the world that is than he is in the world to come. The line between striving to be powerful and self-worship is simply too thin. Then the devil takes Jesus to the top of the temple in Jerusalem (suggesting that it is possible for a wilderness to exist inside a city) and says, "Go ahead, jump. The angels will catch you." Jesus stands still and then proclaims, "You shall not test me." Actually, this is not what he says, but sometimes I hear it this way. What he says is,

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“You shall not put the Lord your God to the test,” but, of course he does. Isn’t this what the devil is doing now? By saying, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test,” Jesus proclaims that he is the devil’s God. Meaning: the plan of the one who tempts him is subverted from the beginning.

The Spirit soon will lead him elsewhere but not until the devil flees. At this point in the story, Luke twists the plot beautifully by saying, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until the opportune time.” This statement is haunting, mysterious and bizarre in a way. When is an opportune time for the devil? Why don’t we worship then?

It is funny to think that Jesus is baptized to be tempted, and he is tempted to be empowered. Chances are, you have been tempted since you were baptized. I know that I have been tempted. Maybe once...in the Carolinas...but not in Alabama: I serve a congregation in Alabama that is wild, radically different---subversive even. I pray that we tempt each other to remember our baptisms, to be led by the Spirit wherever it may lead and to ask difficult questions that may lead us through the valley of the shadow of doubt and fear no evil, trusting God to be faithful.

When we pray, “Lead us not into temptation,” maybe what we are asking God to deliver us from is evil, but that “but” comes next, and the “but” bothers me, because the Spirit leads Christ into temptation, and the Spirit leads us into temptation so that others may be delivered from evil. Remember that we are called to ministry by virtue of our baptism, and much of the work we do takes place in wilderness settings.

If we prayed this prayer in an ecumenical setting, we would say, “Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil,” which I think has more in common with the story of Jesus being led into the wilderness. O God, save us from the time of trial. Save Haiti from their suffering. Deliver us from worldly corruption, and grant us the courage and strength step into the next wilderness to which we are

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led by God's Spirit. The same Spirit that delivered Jesus will deliver us. Now to the Ruler of all worlds,
undying, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen.

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