

Jon Hauerwas – March 5, 2017 – Testing and Tempting
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

Baptism of the Lord Sunday was January 8. That's nearly two months ago, which may seem like a distant memory now. But, as Matthew tells the story, Jesus' baptism was immediately followed by his temptation in the Judean wilderness. And that's actually a really interesting connection. Because it suggests that if baptism serves as the formal initiation into the life of faith, this great high note, this spiritual cleansing, this sign of forgiveness and new life, then, well, temptation is sure to follow.

I think that Jesus may have hinted at this in the parable of the sower. Do you remember? "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

If God is like the sower in this parable, and the seed represents God's Word, and our lives are like these different kinds of soil, then Jesus seems to imply that not

all people are equally equipped to face life's temptations which are sure to come.

I understand that this may sound harsh. But it's true, isn't it?

Just consider this, for example. If someone is struggling with an addiction, then that person is a lot more likely to resist temptation if he or she has already endured and resisted that temptation a number of times before. Each time that an individual is tempted or tested and resists, then the soil of their lives – to return again to that image from Jesus' parable – becomes a little bit more healthy and a little bit more capable of sustaining and nurturing life.

Well, I want to tell you a personal story here. While I do not consider myself a recovering alcoholic, I do recognize that there was a time in my life when I was consuming far more alcohol than I should have. I drank quite a bit in high school, and in college, and while living in Britain. And I saw how easy it would be to use alcohol as a crutch whenever I faced life's challenges. I had been accepted to seminary. I was considering ordained ministry. And at that point in my life, I believed that I needed to pursue a different path. So I made the decision that I was not going to drink anymore.

At first, it was terribly difficult as I went in and out of pubs in Britain and Ireland with my friends. And then returned to America where nothing felt the same. But as the weeks, and then months, and then years passed, my desire for alcohol continually decreased. It's now been over 10 years since I last had a drink. And while I have certainly been tested and tempted on many occasions along the way, I managed to understand that my life would actually be a whole lot better if I focused upon cultivating rich, good soil, instead of looking for the nearest escape route.

How are you tempted? What does that feel like? And when does it usually happen? In the Bible, temptation is often accompanied by a shadowy figure. Adam and Eve, as you may recall, were enjoying life in paradise, but they still seemed to want more. This, after all, is the human condition. And about that time, a serpent appeared and began to whisper in their ears.

“Oh,” said the serpent, “God told you that you can eat the fruit of every tree in the garden... just not THAT one? Oh my, I've tried that one before. And I want to let you in on a little secret. God doesn't want you to eat the fruit from that tree because God wants to keep that one for God's self. Yes. God is selfish. But you deserve the best, don't you? You deserve just as much as God has. So take. Eat. Try

for yourself. You won't be disappointed. In fact, you will become like God." And so, they ate.

Oh how we long for forbidden fruit. Or just one more bite of cake. Food can sometimes be our downfall, which is why brief periods of fasting can become so spiritually enriching for us. As our bodies long for daily nourishment, we are constantly reminded that we do not live by bread alone, but owe our very existence to the care of our gracious God.

So back, then, to Jesus. He had just been baptized. Not for his own sake, of course, but for ours. It was, in other words, an act of solidarity with broken humanity. But no sooner had he heard the voice of God say, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased," then he was on a collision course with temptation.

Matthew tells us that Jesus traveled through the Judean wilderness for forty days and forty nights. That's the same amount of time as the great flood in Genesis and it's the same number of years in Exodus that Moses and the Hebrew people traveled through the wilderness in search of the Promised Land. According to the text, Jesus was fasting and he was preparing himself for the spiritual work at hand.

And about that time, a shadowy figure emerged, whispering, “You must be exhausted and completely famished. But, let’s get real. Are you the Son of God or aren’t you? If so, then why don’t you do something about it? Just command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread and, I promise you, it will be the most satisfying meal of your life.”

It’s the same trick, isn’t it, that the serpent used before? It’s the same temptation that caused Adam and Eve to stumble. But Jesus, this new Adam, refuses to repeat the mistakes of the past. And he makes a critical distinction between physical hunger and spiritual nourishment saying “we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Still this tempter is undeterred, and the whispering campaign continues. Next, the evil one “took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘You are God’s Son, right? If so, then why not jump? I mean, what do you have to be afraid of? Surely, God will save you. A whole band of angels will descend. They will swoop in and lift you up. Surely, God will not let you – YOU of all people – die so early and so tragically.’” But, Jesus responds, “Do not put your God to the test.”

Evil, though, is terribly persistent. And so, one last test remains. The tempter took Jesus “to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’” Surely, this is where we get the phrase “making a deal with the devil.” Jesus said to him, “‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ Then the tempter left him, and suddenly the angels came and waited on him.””

I invite you to think about Jesus’ gifts, and skills, and abilities. Think about his charisma, his ability to make other people feel important and special, his talent for captivating an audience, the comfort with which he spoke to large groups, and his wisdom and quick wit when challenged by opponents. With skills like this, he certainly had other options didn’t he? He easily could have used his charisma to pursue all that sparkles and shines. Or he may have employed his talents to deliver an earthly throne. It was all there for the taking.

Lamb of God, we thank you for resisting evil and for showing us the way. For taking not life’s pleasures, but the sins of this world, instead. For carrying them on your shoulders. For stooping this low. For enduring the shame of the cross. And for reigning in victory for us. Be with us throughout these forty days. And lead us not

into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and glory forever. Amen.