

ONLY HUMAN

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

February 25, 2007

Scripture: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

In the movie, **The Devil Wears Prada**, Meryl Streep, plays the boss from hell, Miranda Priestly the editor of a high profile fashion magazine. Her protégé Andrea Sachs, fresh from college works her way up from coffee girl and pencil sharpener to first assistant, handling “the book” delivered to Miranda’s home each night which contains the rush photographs for the next day’s decisions about the magazine. This job that *a million girls would die to have*, however, nearly kills Andrea as she loses her friends, her boyfriend, her sense of herself and her direction in life, serving Miranda slavishly night and day.

Toward the end of the film as Andrea rides in a limousine with Miranda, they talk about whether it’s all worth it, this fabulous life that Miranda is leading, which is really very shallow. Miranda’s marriage has failed, her children are brats, her competitors have betrayed her. Looking at Miranda’s life Andrea asks Miranda “but suppose I don’t want this.” And Miranda looks at Andrea incredulously and says, “Don’t be silly. Everyone wants this. Everybody wants to be us.”

Well actually they don’t or at least Andrea decides in the end that she doesn’t. She leaves Miranda getting out of the other side of the limousine as the paparazzi blind Miranda with their flashes of light when she emerges from the car.

The devil may wear Prada today, but in Jesus’ time the devil wore more common trappings, temptations and lures not all that dissimilar to the temptations of today. A friend of mine used to say that everybody wants one of three things, power, money, or fame. And fortunate is the person who gets all three, but if Britney Spears and a legion of other rich and famous people are any measure, it may not be all it’s cracked up to be.

When Jesus flees to the wilderness, driven not by the devil but by the Spirit of God, we know that what he is doing is willfully testing his mettle, placing the rough iron of his soul into the forging furnace to be pounded into a sharp blade on the desert’s anvil.

Forty days Jesus is there amid the sand and the wind. Like Israel’s forty years wandering in the wilderness, the number evokes a longer memory of a people whose character was formed as nomads in the desert.

He ate nothing, during those days, and when he was finally exhausted, famished from hunger, a forty day growth of beard, sweat caked onto his skin, blistered and burned from exposure to the sun and the burning sand, the devil moved closer to whisper in his ear.

“The Son of Man could turn a stone into bread, I’ll bet. I can smell it now, the yeasty steam of fresh baked bread. What about some bread, Jesus? Aren’t you hungry? I’m starved.” And Jesus said, “We do not live by bread alone.”

So the devil took him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. “All this can be yours, king Jesus,” the devil said, “just worship me.” And Jesus answered, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

Finally, the devil took him to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple saying, “Throw yourself down, Jesus, you know God will save you.” To which Jesus said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Three scenes of a day’s journey, a sequence that seems surreal, so dreamlike is it. And Luke notes, when the temptations were ended, and Jesus lay wasted in the shadows of the sands, the devil departed *until an opportune time*.

And when is an opportune time? And opportune for whom? If Jesus’ experience is any measure, the assumption would be that the tempter waits for a moment when we are least expecting to lay before us a set of choices that look appealing.

The temptations Jesus faced, after all, were not choices between good and evil, but between the greater and the lesser good. Take the bread for instance. If Jesus could have fed the hungry and done only that, it would have been enough. God knows there are hungry people with us still. They are lined up for the soup kitchen, they are mothers who can barely afford to feed their children, the folks who cannot spend on food in an entire week what some of us spent last night on dinner at a restaurant. Every 6 seconds a child dies of malnutrition or starvation in this world. That’s 14,000 children worldwide every day.¹ Jesus might have been a social activist, working for justice in a world of injustice, never resting until every mouth was fed. That would have been a miracle and an inspiration to others to do likewise. But no, he said, “We do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from God.”

And what about all those kingdoms? If only Jesus had been an earthly king, a conqueror, a triumphant warrior. David had been that, after all. But David came and went, and what had become of his kingdom? “Worship me,” the devil said, “and it will all be yours.” But no, Jesus ruled that out as well. No earthly kingdom. No terrestrial throne. No presidencies or prime ministerships for him. “Worship the Lord your God, he said, and serve only him.”

Finally the temple... Jerusalem... and all he had to do was test God with a miracle, save him on a free fall from the tip of the temple top. The devil promised it would only be a bungee jump. And just to fool with his mind, the devil quoted scripture, “God will command his angels concerning you to protect you. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you do not dash your foot against a stone.”

Miracles would have been a convincing proof to the people. And Jesus performed a few. He walked on water. He was known as a healer. Could he not have been the greatest doctor ever known, and thus inspired healing throughout the world as a proof of God’s power and love? But no, Jesus waved the tempter away, and thereby waved away the temptation to prove his authority through miracles. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test,” he said.

Three quotes from scripture they were, all from Deuteronomy these words of Jesus, three strands left hanging from a life frayed at the ends. Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:13, and 6:16. Not bad under duress, your body aching from hunger, your mind in a haze.

Three life preservers of sanity and spiritual peace grasped when he was neck-deep in water. They were enough to push the devil away and hold body and soul together, these three memory verses. Enough to hold the devil away at least until the next time, until an *opportune* time.

There is a sense in which we learn more in this story about what Jesus is not than we do about what he is. Someone has said that it's like looking at the negative exposure of the film. Remember when we used film? We see in the exposure all the choices Jesus rejects.

He will not use his powers in the ways we would most likely use them were we him. He will not take care of his own physical needs first. He will not seek the glory or power of the world. And he will not be a messiah who will protect himself from what the world can do to him, and will. Instead, he places himself at the mercy and intention of God.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote a service of covenant renewal which was used on the first Sunday of the new year each year as an opportunity for his congregation to reaffirm their commitment to serving God. The prayer is a powerful one.

Lord, I am no longer my own, but Yours. Put me to what You will, rank me with whom You will. Let be employed by You or laid aside for You, exalted for You or brought low by You. Let me have all things, let me have nothing, I freely and heartily yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal.

It is a prayer that has always moved me not so much for its self sacrifice and self denial, as for its realism. This is the prayer of one who has reckoned with the reality that his life is not his own. That all of us are accountable for who we are and how we live and all of it is ultimately surrendered to God who gave us life in the first place and without whom our lives would be so much less.

I understand the desire for fame and riches and power. In this capitalist capital of the world, one cannot miss the import of what all of those things can get you. The best seats in the theater. The best table at the restaurant. Designer clothes and breathtaking vacations. A luxury car to drive you wherever you want to go and a GPS system so that you are never lost. An apartment with a 360 degree view of the island of Manhattan. *All the kingdoms of the world laid forth in a moment of time.*

Money, fame, power... has its place, you know. To ignore that is to be dishonest about the deepest aspirations in our lives, the ones with which we all must reckon.

I wonder what it is that most tempts you, or wherein your temptations lie. Is it the dullness of a marriage or a relationship that has gone flat, and the lure of someone more exciting that keeps crossing your path? Is it an addiction, the numbing of your senses that makes the world go better when you're not all there?

Is it the suspicion that other people are leading more interesting lives and that what you are doing is not much by comparison, the temptation to live in fantasy about others and in dread about yourself?

Is it the lure of money that drives you to sacrifice family and friends on the altar of work? I don't know. Our temptations are such a private thing. So *personal* because they are so *integral* to our lives. And the tempter is always nearby, isn't he, waiting for an opportune time.

Madison Avenue has a heyday with our temptations doesn't it? Plastering alluring images like chocolates and ice creams and scantily clad models on every bus kiosk in the city. Would that our temptations were that straightforward or so easily dismissed. Most of the really important temptations in our lives have darker intentions and take a greater toll on us than those allurements. It was Oscar Wilde, who said, "I can resist anything except temptation." And who would have known better than he? Perhaps, given some time, and some honesty, each of us could site our tipping point, that lure that shines so brightly we cannot help but bite.

Barbara Brown Taylor, still one of my favorite writers, has a short sermon on *Lenten Discipline* in which she invites her listeners to go with Jesus precisely into that place where temptation lies, to stare the worst in the face and to trust that God will give you strength to meet the trial.

She says,

The emptiness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying. Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick pacifiers in our mouths and suck for all we're worth...

To enter the wilderness is to leave them [the pacifiers] behind, and nothing is too small to give up. Even a chocolate bar will do. For forty days, simply pay attention to how often your mind travels in that direction. Ask yourself why it happens when it happens. What is going on when you start craving a Mars bar? Are you hungry? Well, what is wrong with being hungry? Are you lonely? What is so bad about being alone? Try sitting with the feeling instead of fixing it [suggests Taylor] and see what you find out.²

I wonder if at the heart of our fear of temptation is the suspicion not so much that we will not be strong, but that there will not be God. There will be no angels to minister to us. No forgiveness to restore us. No courage to stand by us in the opportune hour of temptation.

Isn't the suspicion that most of us harbor deep inside, the fear that if anyone really knew us they could not love us? While all along God has known us and loved us, through and through. Even when we were not strong. Even in the inopportune times when we did not meet the trial.

Jesus, after all was divine and human all in one the ancient fathers and mothers of the church decided long before we ever gave it a thought. But we are only human, and while Jesus had the power to resist temptation, sometimes we do not.

Yet the good news of the gospel is that even when we fail we are forgiven. Because we are asked to be nothing more than human, only human, and fully human, which is to aspire to the best that God has given us in giving us Jesus as a sign of hope for our humanity and against temptation. For God will stand with us in the time of trial, urging us on, cheering us along the way, one of the balcony people glad to be there for us.

The opportune time noted by Luke at the end of the desert temptations, that time to which the devil receded, comes at the end of the gospel, in the garden of Gethsemane, when after the Passover meal that Jesus celebrated with his disciples he went to pray, and ultimately to be arrested.

There in the garden Luke tells us, he asked his closest friends to watch and pray with him in the darkness of the grove and the lateness of the hour. “Pray that you not come into temptation,” he advised Peter, James, and John. And then went off by himself where Luke says he prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me;” and for a moment the whole course of salvation’s enterprise hung in the balance. It weighed there for a time in the darkness of that secluded place like an overripe apple hanging low on the tree, until finally Jesus said, “not my will but yours be done.” And at that point, having endured to the end, Luke records, “an angel from heaven then appeared” to Jesus “and gave him strength.”

These forty days of Lent that we have entered are solemn days of preparation and penitence, reflection and prayer, quietness and introspection. We step back and look at our lives with thoughtful eyes and wonder at our frailty, and pray for strength, and look for the will to endure temptation.

Jesus, child of God, mixture of heaven and earth, humanity and divinity, met temptation in the wilderness and was strengthened by God for the life he was meant to live. And we, children of God, a mixture of heaven and earth, only human, struggle with the temptations of our lives, and do so with courage knowing that when the opportune moment comes, God will give us strength to endure, and even should we fail, God will give us a savior to make right whatever is wrong.

That is God’s promise in the desert and in the city, in good times and in bad, in opportune and inopportune times, making us strong in all the broken places, keeping us strong in every trial.

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¹ www.letThemlive.com

² Barbara Brown Taylor, **Home by Another Way**. (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999) 67.