

“THE LIFE THAT REALLY IS LIFE”

(Expanded Version)

Luke 4:1-13

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The Rev. Adam S. Linton

The Church of the Holy Spirit, Orleans, Massachusetts

On the first Sunday of Lent we hear the story of Christ’s Temptation; Christ’s own time of testing in the wilderness. In this he faced—but with uniquely different outcome—the basic, primal human temptation we all share. The tempter set before Jesus an appeal to a certain view of human life; a view of “how things are” that is not only unfaithful, but at the core of it, delusional.

The tempter sets before us the view that we live on our own—and by our own measure. We hear of Jesus’ testing in marked contrast to the story in the third chapter of Genesis; the account of humankind’s Fall. The hard truth we must first encounter in the way of the Spirit is that this is the story of *our* “reality,” all of us; the story of our predicament.

We read:

“But the serpent said... ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of [this tree] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.” (Genesis 3:4-6)

The tempter appealed to what John in his First Letter calls “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” (1 John 2:16, KJV) In other words, the appeal to appetite, envy, and pride!

Of course, God made us liable to hunger; we need to eat in order to live. The tempter, however, would tell us that physical appetite is to be pursued, unquestionably, as its own end. Then

appetite (of all sorts) becomes “the lust of the flesh,” the corrosive notion that our bodily desires are the deepest truth—the truest truth—about who and what we are. We want what we want—and that’s it.

Garnered protectively around the agenda of appetite is the life-strategy of envy: “the lust of the eyes.” The satisfaction of our physical desires is always subject to uncertainty. So we launch into the insatiable quest for *more*. No matter how much we’ve had, it never can be enough. We become desperate to insulate ourselves from any possible privation. And so, by definition, whatever others have—beyond our own possessing—becomes a threat.

Encasing the agenda of appetite and the strategy of envy is pride—the consuming corruption of our spiritual disposition. It is *we* who must be in the front and center of all things; and above all, in control. Everything else, God included, must be subject to our manipulation; must perform in accordance with our expectations.

Of course, in all this, we tell ourselves that we’re only protecting the little—so very little—that we have coming to us.

Needless to say, this delusional view of life leads only to one place. It has been said that sin is an equal-opportunity employer—and, as we know, “the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23)

The tempter’s appeal is a swindle; a thievery and a rip-off. Despite that appeal’s promise, it can’t “deliver.” It can only lead us, in the end, to the place where we are bereft of our own selves. When we try to live “on our own”—and by our own measure—we lose even what we started with: our humanness. Only in communion with God can we be who we really are. We can be truly “satisfied” only when we are filled with God’s greater provision, at peace only when we trust that provision, and our lives rightly ordered only when we are submitted to God’s Lordship.

Without this, our lives lapse into sub-humanity.

Let’s read, again, the three temptations from today’s Gospel, Luke, chapter four. In each of these, Jesus faced what we face.

First, the temptation of *appetite*:

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.” ’ ” (Luke 4:1-4)

Our bodies (and our emotions)—especially in their “right now” sort of way—tell us: “What I want is who I am.” But we actually have *different* desires going on in us; at the same time, and frequently in conflict with one another. Our deeper, truer desire is often *not* the one insistently shouting out in immediately greater volume. The greatest human tragedy is to get what we thought we wanted—what we insisted upon—and to discover, in the end, that it was a fraud; one that we perpetrated upon ourselves. As an ultimate reality, that might not be too bad a description of Hell.

To know the true heart’s desire requires hearing—in the midst of all the noise—the “still small voice.” (1 Kings 19:12, KJV) In that quiet utterance we are enabled to know, as expressed in Saint Augustine’s prayer, “Our heart is restless until it rests in You,” O Lord. (*Confessions*, Book I, chapter 1)

But *to hear as Jesus heard*; that’s a *new* hearing for the likes of us, made possible only by the Spirit’s intervention.

It’s a *new thing* because it does not lie in the range of our previous capabilities, such as they have been; not achievable from the store of our separate potentiality. Rather it’s an in-grafting, first to be received as gift—and then to be deliberately cultivated.

Next, we read of the temptation to *envy*:

“Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it

will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” ’ ’ (Luke 4:5-8)

The voice of envy tells us that we must always hedge our bets. The insatiable quest for more—with whatever “deals with the devil” we have to make—is the only way we can protect what we have. Generosity? At best, a strategy. Love? An illusion. In the end, isn’t all relationship either consumption or competition?

Jesus knew the lies for what they are. In Jesus—the Word become flesh—God accepted our own vulnerability. In Jesus, we at long last see what human faith in the midst of all our vulnerability is.

To trust as Jesus trusted; that’s a *new thing* for the likes of us, made possible only by the Spirit’s intervention.

Finally, the temptation of *pride*:

“Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’ ’ (Luke 4:9-12)

Pride is more than a ridiculously inflated sense of self (although it certainly includes that). The voice of pride tells us, above all, that we need to be *in control*—that all things ought to be performing on our behalf. We can even tell ourselves, that it’s for everyone else’s good—God included!

The prideful disposition is set to interpret the difficulties of our life, over and over again, as the product of the bad, unfaithful “others”—again, God included. The prideful mind is therefore *characteristically* resentful and unthankful. All good things come to be seen, simply, as what reality somehow owes us. So, pride’s “solution” to the human predicament always amounts to the same thing: the assertion of *dominance*.

And yes; pride is fully capable of quoting scripture while doing so!

Jesus knew that the only real human freedom can never come through our various “triumphs of the will.” Rather, our real freedom comes only through Godly submission.

But—once again: To obey as Jesus obeyed—to obey *in* the obedience of Jesus; that’s the *new thing* for the likes of us, made possible only by the Spirit’s intervention.

What the tempter offers is a counterfeit “life” in place of life: heavy fortification around a hollowed-out core; disintegration within our own desperate siege-works. What Jesus manifested in his testing is the only “life that really is life.” (1 Timothy 6:19)

A very early Christian writing states, “There are two Ways: a Way of Life and a Way of Death, and the difference between these two ways is great.” (*The Didache*, I.1; see also Deuteronomy 30:19)

Two stories: Genesis, chapter three—and Luke, chapter four. Which is it going to be? Into which story is *your* life heading?

Not a bad pondering for a First Sunday of Lent.

We *all* know the first story, of course. All too well. A deeper question is this: Do we know the second story, too? And perhaps even more to the point: Which of the two stories now constitutes the present direction of our life?

The Good News is that taking hold of the “life that really is life” is not a matter of slogging it out on our own—in the impossible task of replicating the achievement of Christ. It is an in-breaking reality made possible in us by the Intervention of the Spirit, which calls and claims us in Christ’s New Story.

So a most apt Lenten prayer for us might be, “Come, Holy Spirit, come!”

Of course, this doesn’t mean that we just sit back and relax. There *is* “work given us to do.” (Prayer after Communion, *The Book of Common Prayer*, page 366) Even here, though, it is the Spirit of God, actualizing in us the Christ-Life, at work throughout the whole course of our long

journey. We work seriously—but we work, and sometimes we struggle, in serious *response* to what God has done—and what God is continuing to do in this Jesus “who was tempted as we are, yet did not sin.” (Hebrews 4:15; Proper Preface for Lent (1), *Book of Common Prayer*, page 379) Godly hearing, trust, and obedience are of *Christ*—and precisely because they are of Christ must become *ours*, too.

“By his grace we are able to triumph over every evil, and to live no longer for ourselves alone but for him who died for us and rose again.”

Be assured: Ours is a God who knows how to finish what he has begun.

Thereby, we are meeting God’s Glory. Thereby, we are given our own selves back.

Amen.