

"HAVING IT OUT WITH THE DEVIL"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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TEXT: "And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the Devil".

(Luke 4: 1)

INTRODUCTION In the three Gospels that carry it, the story of the Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness follows hard on the heels of the story of His Baptism - a high moment when, as you recall, the heavens opened and a voice was heard: "This is My Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

One wonders: does this sequence of events indicate that every great vision fades into the light of common day? - that after every mountaintop experience comes a return to the valley floor? Perhaps so, and for the reason offered by T. S. Eliot: "Go, go, go" said the bird, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality!"

But that assessment is beside the point, for here Reality itself, the Holy Spirit, if you will, leads Jesus out of the Jordan and into the wilderness, proving that the Spirit is both comforter and dis-comforter. Pain is an essential part of the religious life, for as this story goes on to show, pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses our understanding. Our text is a great one, reserved for that time of year when we begin to prepare for Lent.

DEVELOPMENT Heart-searching, soul-searching time that it is, Lent should be painful and rewarding - a time for us to be led by the Spirit into our own wildernesses, to have it out, eyeball to eyeball, with the devil, on all the basic issues of our lives. For, like steel, we human beings are uncertain until we are tested.

Now do not be dismayed that the Church personifies evil. The devil is imaginatively portrayed as a person because evil is experienced in life as an intensely personal power. Its seductions are personally persuasive which reminds me of something Oscar Wilde once said, "I can resist everything except temptation".

And moreover, while evil certainly arises within us, still it is experienced as something greater than us - hence its separate existence. And most importantly, the devil is a fallen angel. How many parents tell their children that evil arises in the "so-called" lower nature. But notice that the devil never asks Jesus how He feels, for example, about sex, any more than Jesus ever put that question to anybody else. Both know that evil arises in our "higher" nature, in that which is most Godlike in us - our freedom. Not that our higher nature can't abuse our lower nature, but the source of the evil is always found in our freedom. And what does the devil ask us to do with our freedom? In countless subtle and seductive ways the devil whispers in our ears, "Sell it" - which is to say, "Sell yourselves short."

FIRST TEMPTATION The subtlety comes through in the first temptation, "Command this stone to become bread". Let's think about this.

After forty days Jesus was, of course, quite hungry, desperately so, but I think His own hunger was making Him remember hungry people everywhere. After all, He had just been baptized, and He was now wrestling with the meaning of it all. What was His mission to be on this earth? He was going eyeball to eyeball with the devil.

Remember, Palestine was plagued by extremes of drought and flood. Bread, a basic necessity, had become a precious commodity, the more so because the Roman taxes, like American taxes today, hurt most those least able to protect themselves. Why then should not Christ become a Messiah of justice, fulfilling God's commands and fulfilling the hopes, too long deferred, of those whose lives were hard, endless and dirty labor? It would have been a proper, hard-headed, courageous role for Him to have assumed, and one that would have met all of the popular messianic expectations of His day.

And that Christ turned it down simply reminds us how extraordinary - extraordinary - human lives are. "Give us this day our daily bread". Bread is essential, and for that reason, we should never rest until everybody has enough. The Rabbis say, "without material sustenance there is no Torah", and in the Three Penny Opera Bertolt Brecht writes, "First feed the face, and then talk right or wrong".

And Jesus answered the devil, "Man shall not live by bread alone." What we have to confront in this coming time of Lent in our soul's wilderness is the truth of this statement of Berdyaev,

"When bread has been assured, then God becomes a hard and inescapable reality, instead of an escape from harsh reality".

And one is led to wonder: have we not set our sights too low - on a secure and comfortable life that insures us against harsh reality, that assures us bread?

There are many things I have done that I confess repentance to. But they are as nothing compared to the good things I regret not having done. To me, it's not the lives we've lived, but our unlived lives that stand out, and that can poison our existence.

Listen again to these verses from the Story of our Creation:

"Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being."

We need to remember that the breath of life has been breathed into our nostrils. We are nature PLUS. Our hands not only bring food to our mouths, but they also play the flute; they help us salute one another, and they also help us to address God, the Father of us all. We are "extra-ordinary". We need to be told this. We do not live by bread alone. There's so much more to life than food and clothing and comfortable homes. So, in this time of Lent that's coming along, in our separate wildernesses, we have to ask ourselves whether the devil has not seduced us to sell ourselves short, to live only by the light of the obvious, and to grab greedily at today that we end up losing all tomorrows.

Have we not, like Esau, sold our birthright for a mess of potage? Clearly we have much to think about in terms of our values and the life styles we have adopted...including these words of Jesus, the Lord of life:

"My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work." (John 4: 34)

SECOND TEMPTATION

If the first Temptation was to satisfy the economic needs of His own people, the second temptation of Jesus seems to

have had something to do with their patriotic passion. Rome was then the oppressor, with a garrison of soldiers in every sizeable town, not only to levy taxes, but also to put down revolts. Surely the spiritual descendants of the boys of '76 can understand the temptation of Christ to become the George Washington of Israel, to rally the six million Jews scattered throughout the ancient world and perhaps in alliance with the Parthians, to bring defeat to Rome, peace to His people and glory to God.

Alfred the Great is reported to have said, "Power is never good unless he who has it is good". The devil could have whispered convincingly in the ear of Jesus, "Now Jesus...if anybody is good it is surely the Son of God. Wouldn't power in your hands represent love implementing freedom and justice for all? Why not prove - once and for all - that love and power are not polar opposites?"

And what a temptation! And Jesus answered, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.'" That Christ withstood this temptation too should lead us to more painful heart-searching, to question more than we do our own American reliance on power - particularly military power, the power to kill - as the best way to protect freedom and peace in our world.

Suppose you and I were to pick up today's paper and read that Mayor Koch - tired of conventional ways of fighting crime in this city - is presenting a new idea to the Police Commissioner...a new policy of deterrence. From now on, the police of NYC are going to kill every last member of the family and every last acquaintance of anybody who from now on commits murder within the city limits. He is fed up. I think you and I would be horrified. To threaten to kill so many innocent people represents power run amok.

Yet that is an analogy - stretched, to be sure - for our present policy of nuclear deterrence - except that the hostage system is massive. We - and the Russians - have promised to kill in retaliation every last man, woman and child in each other's countries, almost none of whom will have anything to say with the decision to press the button. It's sheer madness. So, go into your wilderness and search your heart and see if you can square that policy with the word of the Lord your God.

THIRD TEMPTATION

And finally, we read that the devil, "took Him up to Jerusalem and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to Him, 'If you are the Son of God'" (always that attack at the identify point...where we're always weakest...) "If you are...then throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will give His angels charge of you, to guard you'".

And Jesus answered him, 'It is said you shall not tempt the Lord, your God''

The first thing to note - and well - is that the devil quotes Scripture! But what is the temptation? Is this "unfaith clamoring to be coined to faith by proof?" Can't you picture the crowds gathered below on the street, saying, "Look...He's going to jump. He has jumped. He's safe. Golly, He must be the Messiah!"

And did Jesus reject the temptation knowing that freedom and proof are, religiously speaking, indeed polar opposites? Or did He think then what He said later on in the Parable, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will

they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead?"

Or, more subtly, is this the kind of temptation that comes to a person who has finally renounced the struggle for worldly security and the struggle for worldly power and has committed himself or herself to God, but with the secret expectation that God will now do all the work? So much so-called "spirituality" is superficiality, pure laziness reminiscent of the story of the priest who went golfing with the Rabbi. But before putting the priest crossed himself. By the 9th hole he was nine strokes ahead of the Rabbi. Said the Rabbi,

"Father...do you suppose it would be all right if before I putted I, too, crossed myself?" Answered the priest, "Of course, rabbi....but it won't do any good 'till you learn how to putt".

The point is this. There are many people in the churches, people who want to cop out on all the responsibilities that go with personal freedom, who want selfishly to ask God to take care of them when they are supposed to be out taking care of the world. They come to Church, but they don't leave. They do church work, but not the work of the Church.

CLOSING And so, dear Christian friends, we have our work cut out for us as we prepare to walk into the wilderness of Lent. To be sure, this is heady stuff. The cross comes into the picture. Let us not be afraid in these coming days to go into our own wilderness and go "eyeball to eyeball" with the devil on the basic issues of our lives.

Let us not be afraid of the pain that is the breaking of the shell which encloses our understanding.

Let us remind ourselves that because God has breathed into our nostrils the breath of life, we cannot sell our freedom, we cannot sell ourselves short. Made in His image, children of God, we are capable of great things. Besides, who really wants to sell his or her freedom for material well being and comfort. And do we as a nation really want to trade in our power to love for loveless power? And as individuals, do we want God to take care of us when we should be reaching out and caring for others?

One more thing and then I close. At the end of Matthew's account of this Story of Temptation we read:

"Then the devil left him, and behold - angels came and ministered to him".

There are still angels around ready to do no less for you and for me. But that's another sermon, for another day, and that is the rewarding side of our Lenten spiritual adventure.

PRAYER: O Lord Jesus, as Thou didst long ago face grave questions about the mission that God called Thee to do, so we face questions about our purpose in life. Grant that we may always remember Thee, how when Thou was tempted to do something good, but not good enough, Thou didst stand firm and setting aside all compromise and all play for popularity, Thou didst set Thy face toward Jerusalem. Be with each of us in our time of testing that we may remain strong and loyal to Thee. In Your name we pray. Amen

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