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Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel NYC
March 10, 2019 Lent 1st Sunday of Year C Luke 9:28b-36

Today's Gospel reading focuses on Jesus in a very human moment of trial and testing. Here, we see telescoped into one event three constant and ongoing temptations that Jesus faced as alternative paths in His role as Messiah, paths that might have appeared more appealing to different segments of the population of His day, but which ultimately were false and had to be rejected by Him. Some wanted Jesus to be a revolutionary who would overthrow Roman rule; others wanted someone like King David who would make Israel great again; others wanted a great High Priest who would rid the Temple of corruption. Here we see a very human Jesus wrestling with His role as Messiah, as God's Chosen One.

The temptations Jesus faced and rejected are the same ones that we all encounter. So, let us now look at each of them, and see how they are mirrored in our own lives. First, Jesus is tempted to change stones into bread—to use His power in some magical way, to remove His hunger with a simple word. How often does the temptation come to us to banish the unpleasant aspects of our world by some kind of magical thinking—to use the power of our imagination to transform reality, to deny what is going on around us because it appears for us too much to have to face and deal with? Will I tried to “change stones into bread,” i.e., try to manipulate the unwieldy and unwelcome situation in which I find myself by just hoping things will somehow get better by themselves, with any rationalization preferable to dealing with the situation realistically? Do I prefer to settle for the “devil I know” than to face the “devil I don't know,” i.e., to live with the familiar discomfort of the present, the status quo, than risk the pain and the possibilities for real growth that comes from acting or speaking in a new way? Is the fear of the unknown so paralyzing that I'll jump at some quick fix, some magical solution, to hold together what is rapidly falling apart before my very eyes? All attempts to do the impossible, but that doesn't stop us anyway.

With the second temptation, Jesus is offered all the kingdoms of the world. What role does power, possessions, wealth play in my life? Do I try to use things or people to plug up the holes in my life, to compensate for my own personal inadequacies? Will I use money or my job to convince myself, and others, too, that I am really someone important? Will I abuse alcohol, food or chemicals to dull the pain of confronting who I am? Will I push the buttons and pull the strings of the people around me to manipulate them, to make them conform to my expectations and demands, rather than be willing to recognize their needs? In short, while I tried to exploit the good things of life, demanding of people and things more than they can possibly deliver, to satisfy my ego, my needs?

Finally Jesus is tempted to jump off the Temple roof to see whether an angel will come to protect Him. We might ask ourselves, "Am I searching for some "angel," someone to rescue me from the pain of being human, someone or some institution to "take care" of me, rather than look for, or develop within myself, the capacity to take responsibility for my own life? For example, sometimes people marry hoping that their spouse will now make life more simple, more accommodating for them, that he or she will "take care" of them in some vague, unspecified way. Then, when that fails, they may retreat to the routine of their job or of taking care of the children, seeking that as a way out, rather than communicate with each other about the difficulties and joys, too, they are experiencing in their married life. Or, a single person, afraid to be bruised in the fray of human relationships, may withdraw behind a façade of cynicism or cool, never getting too emotionally close to another because of the fear that they will only get burned. Some may bury themselves in work or in mindless entertainment or partying, always keeping people at a safe distance, because, whether consciously or not, they operate by the principle that people will always let you down.

It may happen, too, that a person may look to religion to be the "rescuing angel," hoping that "blind faith" will be enough to get me through. As we read in today's Gospel, we notice how constantly the Tempter quotes Scripture, but twists it to His own purposes. In the same way we can use religion simply as a means of self-defense against a world that seems all too hostile and conflicted. For us, too, there is the temptation to succumb to an approach to religion wherein this earthly life is devalued, is not taken as mattering so much as the life to come. Consequently, if this life doesn't count for much, I don't have to really deal with it; I can escape from it by putting all my eggs in the basket I hope to receive in the life to come.

Jesus said, "I came that you may have life and have life in abundance." The temptations Jesus faced and overcame show us how we too often try to deal with life on our own terms, with magical thinking or exploitative or escapist techniques. They are all paths that we hope will get us through the mess, but ultimately lead to dead ends. The path that leads to an authentic and fulfilling life is the one that Jesus took, the one that led to Calvary and Easter, the path of openness and vulnerability. The challenge for us is always to engage life, not to try to run away from it by the strategies we are so quick to employ. That means to take up our cross daily and carry it, that we deal with those unwieldy, unwelcome, unwanted chunks of life that are thrown at us, that we deal with them and not simply deny what is going on; or, in anger, try to blame others; or put off to tomorrow what should have been done yesterday; or wallow in despair and depression saying the situation is so hopeless that nothing can be done.

Jesus promises that by accepting our cross, by engaging life rather than retreating from, we experience life more deeply, we become more authentic, more fulfilled human beings. Just as Jesus' Divinity is revealed through His humanity, as we come to accept our own humanity we become open to the healing Jesus offers to us. Believing that is much more difficult than simply saying the words of the Creed. That is why the temptations Jesus confronted are the same ones that seem so appealing to us, too. Let us pray that during these days of Lent, we can see the varied ways in which we are being tempted, where we may have already succumbed, and where with God's grace we can make the path that Jesus chose our path as well.