

Deuteronomy 30: 11-20

Romans 10: 8-13

Luke 4: 1-13

The Word is in Your Heart

February 14, 2016

Mary R. Brownlow

It is Lent: that season of the year that seems either like a cliché or a mystery. To some it inspires memories of giving up sweets for 6 weeks. To others it just seems like an unnecessary exercise in self-abasement. It can be hard to explain to our non-Christian friends, because its practice is so varied among different denominations. To an outsider, it might look more like a diet than a spiritual practice.

So maybe we need a fresh look at what temptation is and what the purpose of “giving something up” might be.

How many of you have had this problem when you are dining out with friends? Someone’s cell phone rings or buzzes or chimes or vibrates. “Just hold on,” they tell you, reaching for their device. They are absolutely incapable of NOT looking at that screen. It’s like one of Pavlov’s dogs salivating. You could be in the middle of a fascinating story or a heart to heart talk. It doesn’t matter. The moment passes. The story is ruined.

A couple of years ago, I heard of a game called Phone Stack. At the start of the meal each diner places their mobile device face down in a pile on the table. The first person to grab their phone, for whatever reason, loses the game and has to pay for everyone’s meal. If everyone resists the temptation for the duration of the dinner, then the check is split.

For good or ill, many people are tethered to their mobile devices. I wonder how many people are giving up their cell phones for Lent. I suspect very few. And yet, there is something important here. To many people that ring or that buzz or that vibration is irresistible because it signals connection, communication, information: things we crave almost more than food. We’ve just gotten our inner compass a bit scrambled when we think that the on-screen connection is more important than the person across the table.

So perhaps our greatest temptations are those which mess up our priorities, so that what we *know* is somehow forgotten for the *now* of need. As Moses says, knowing what is right is very near to us, it is in our hearts. In short, it is not rocket science. That internal compass is already there and available, if we only had the ability to pay attention to it. Lent is the time when we look into our hearts to find what is there, buried under the detritus of hurt and shame and neediness. Lent is the time when we dare to visit the wilderness, knowing that the Spirit leads us to places we would never go left to our own devices. We might never get to the Lenten wilderness following our own compass.

Every year, on the first Sunday in Lent, we read one or another version of the story of Jesus, tempted in the wilderness. Today we read Luke’s version. And I ask myself, why this story? Yes,

the 40 days of his fasting lines up with the 40 days we have before Easter. But why these particular temptations? Are they really about Jesus' opportunities to commit a sin? I don't think so. It's deeper, more complicated than that.

One thing I notice is that the voice of the tempter (or the Adversary, which is the title of Jesus' visitor) sounds a lot like the voice of good advice. "Take care of yourself." "Take charge and save the world." "Prove how faithful you are." None of those things are, in themselves, terrible, any more than checking your cell phone once in a while is terrible. But they are the kind of questions Jesus needed to clarify his character, to renew his spirit, to refine his mission. Would it have been a crime if a few stones miraculously became bread? No. But Jesus saves bread miracles for the time when he is surrounded by hungry people.

In The Book of Forgiveness, which some of us are reading as a Lenten study, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes, "The quality of human life on our planet is nothing more than the sum total of our daily interactions with one another. Each time we help, and each time we harm, we have a dramatic impact on the world. Because we are human, some of our interactions will go wrong, and then we will hurt or be hurt, or both."

Perhaps, in the wilderness, Jesus was listening to his heart, weighing the possibilities of his actions for hurt or harm, weighing the timing of his actions, knowing that the quality of his life, and of so many others, lay in the balance. Perhaps he was learning, adjusting the compass, practicing in a kind of dress rehearsal for what was to come. Later, he will provide bread for many, but not now. Later, Peter will suggest that he does not need to suffer in order to be the Messiah, and he will know it is a false note. Later, he will hang on the cross while the crowd taunts him, "If you are the son of God, perform a miracle, save yourself," and know it for the voice of the adversary.

Perhaps, in the wilderness, Jesus remembered the words of Moses, and chose life, with all the fullness of human relationship. Perhaps, while hungry and thirsty, Jesus prayed from his prayer book, the Psalms: "'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.'" Perhaps he found that he could release the unnecessary burdens of past expectations and the false images of the tempter. Perhaps his heart became free enough to pray, "Take me as I am. Summon out who I shall be."

So what does this have to do with us and with our "temptations?" Henri Nouwen wrote in Life of the Beloved: "Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity, and power can, indeed, present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection.

Maybe you think you are more tempted by arrogance than self-rejection. But isn't arrogance, in fact, the other side of self-rejection? Isn't arrogance putting yourself on a pedestal to avoid being seen as you see yourself? Isn't arrogance, in the final analysis, just another way of dealing with feelings of worthlessness?"

Lent might allow us to claim who and whose we are, apart from the trappings of success or the cloud of shame. We know that for Jesus, the wilderness time meant freedom from fear, freedom from doubt, a clean heart and a renewed spirit.

M. Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote an article recently called “The Post-anxiety Church.” He ended with a description of the baptismal liturgy of the early church, the 2nd century church, when Christianity was illegal. Barnes writes, “In essence they were funerals. Those who were about to enter the church would take off their old clothes as a means of putting off the old, anxiety-ridden life and walk down into the water. The waiting priest would place them under the water saying, “Buried with him in baptism.” As they rose the priest continued, “Risen to new life in Christ.” They put on new clothes as a symbol of putting on Christ. The rationale for this burial form of baptism was to make the members of the church go through “dying” and get it over with. Once they were no longer anxious about Caesar’s persecutions of the church, they were free to boldly proclaim the gospel. You can’t scare dead people.”

I wonder whether Jesus’ wilderness time, following immediately upon his baptism in the Jordan, when he pushed himself to the limits of endurance, was a chance to confront his greatest fears and allow his heart to respond. His heart went through a kind of scrubbing that dissipated anxiety. He could not be scared by what the world threw at him because the Word was in his mouth and in his heart to observe. He was free to embody Good News. What a liberation!

What strikes me about today’s readings is not the weight of sin and punishment. There is more light than darkness here; more grace than fear. We are reminded of our limitations, and reminded of an opportunity to follow Jesus. We are reminded that we “give things up” not to show how pious we are or how much willpower we can exercise, but because we do not want to miss the life-giving relationships that are offered when we let go and freely offer ourselves to God and one another.

We are more than our hungers, more than our fears, more than our mobile devices, more than our skills and more than our ambitions. We are beloved children of God, with hearts created and re-created to love, and serve, and grow. Thanks be to God. Amen.