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## **“Temptation: Not to Be Human”**

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**First Sunday in Lent (Year A)**

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**Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11**

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The temptation story of Jesus is one of the most fascinating and instructive stories in scripture. One reason the temptation of Jesus captures our fascination is that temptation is an experience with which all of us mere mortals are familiar. We don't easily identify with walking on water, healing the sick with a word, or hanging on a cross for a hate-filled world, but temptation we know about. Each of us has his or her own tales to tell.

Bill Russell writes about his temptation in his autobiography. Bill had a tremendous career in basketball. He was a member of the University of San Francisco team that won 55 straight games and the NCAA championship two years in a row. As a center for the Boston Celtics, he participated in eleven championships in 13 years. Five times he was voted most valuable player in the NBA. He went on to coach and manage. Bill Russell says he got into trouble over his mother's banana pudding.

His mother would whip up a big, round bowl of banana pudding in the afternoon and let it cool while she and Mr. Charlie (Bill's father) went out visiting. She told Bill, "While we're gone, don't eat none of that pudding. It's for supper."

Bill tried not to think about the pudding sitting in the kitchen. But before long he went in, just to see if it was cooling right. The edge of the pudding looked ready and the finger-full confirmed it. Back to the living room he went. A little later, with mom and dad still gone, Bill decided a spoonful would not be missed. And

then it was another spoonful, and before long, the pudding was half gone. What the heck, he was in trouble anyway; he might as well finish it off.

Not long after, Bill's parents returned to a locked-up house. Banging on the door, they yelled, "Let us in, Bill. Bill, you've been in that banana pudding, haven't you?!"

We know what it's like to be tempted, don't we? We know what it's like to have pudding on our faces.

That is one of the reasons the temptation of Jesus intrigues us—we want to hear how someone deals with the same problems that we do, and see if we can identify with him.

Another reason for our fascination with the temptation of Jesus is because of who Jesus is. The terms "the son of God" and "temptation" don't fit together for us, and it invites all manner of speculations and questions. What was temptation like for Jesus? Was Jesus tempted with every manner of temptation as are we?

Of course, we won't ever know all the specific temptations Jesus encountered. In the end, I doubt how helpful such knowledge would be. But you and I do know that what tempts one person may have absolutely no tempting appeal for another.

A chocolate candy bar may mean the world to a dieting chocoholic while to another, it provides no temptation at all. Alcohol may be a temptation for someone with that addiction, but for those who do not have this addiction, they will never understand the power of that temptation.

Our speculations about specific temptations of Jesus may be a way of getting at a more fundamental question: Did temptation provide for Jesus, as every temptation does for you and me, a genuine opportunity for going right or wrong, for choosing to be rightly related to God or for skewing that relation? Or, since Jesus was the son of God, was it somehow easier for Jesus to handle temptation?

Critically important questions these are for people of faith who assert that Jesus was both truly divine and truly human.

And a final reason for our fascination with the temptation of Jesus has to do with help for ourselves. I believe that within us is a hungering hope that the way in which Jesus struggled with temptation, and the outcome of his struggle, have relevancy for our own temptations and our life of faith.

Immediately prior to the temptation, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. In his baptism, a baptism that John proclaimed was for the repentance of sin, Jesus identified himself with needy, dependent, sinful people. And what an occasion it turned out to be! The heavens responded, the Spirit came upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven confirmed his identity and mission. What a glorious moment!

However, on the heels of that uplifting experience, Jesus was led, or more correctly, “impelled” by the Spirit to go out into the wilderness. There in that desolate and solitary place, he confronted the very personification of evil itself. And at the point of Jesus’ greatest vulnerability and weakness, when he had been fasting for forty days, the devil comes to him. Three times, Jesus is tempted and three times, Jesus responds with scripture.

The aftermath of the temptation was a time of renewal for Jesus, and then he plunged into his ministry among people. The Gospel of Luke concludes with these words: “And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee...”

One of the threads that runs through the stories of his baptism and temptation, as well as the entire ministry of Jesus, is that Jesus chose to wage the war against sin and evil and death on the battleground of his humanity. Often in my own thinking, the humanity of Jesus is overshadowed by his divinity. The outcome of my thinking in such a vein is that maybe temptation was easier for Jesus to handle; after all, he was the son of God.

Yet if, as our faith asserts, Jesus was truly human, he was tempted as you and I are. His specific temptations may not be the same as ours. If Jesus was truly human, it means that he was limited and weak in the same way as are we.

How is Jesus like us in his temptation? How is Jesus like us in our human nature? How is Jesus like us in response to God?

The word temptation means “to test,” “to try,” “to prove.” Often I think of temptation as an enticement to evil, to break some law or moral code. In scripture, however, temptation is to expose what is underneath, and that may be good or bad. What may be revealed is loyalty or treachery, faith or unbelief, courage or paralyzing fear.

Jesus’ temptation is not of the nature of keeping or breaking some law or moral code. His temptation is one of confirming his direction or altering it. Will he continue to identify with limited, sinful human beings as he did at his baptism? Or will he use his prerogatives as the “son of God” to make his human creatureliness somehow better than ours and therefore make his life different than ours?

Listen to the first temptation: “I know you must be hungry out here, Jesus. Forty days is a long time to deprive one’s self of sustenance. As the son of God, why don’t you use your power to feed yourself?”

And the second temptation: “The human race is a tough audience, Jesus. You know how they are. They have expectations, they need a big show, they demand proof. A leap from the pinnacle of the temple would effectively demonstrate your position as the son of God. People would go for that. And you are assured of a safe landing because scripture says that angels will protect you.”

And the final temptation: “Do you see all the kingdoms of this world? They are mine, and I know your intent is to wrestle them away from me. I tell you what: I’ll give them to you without any bloodshed or struggle or pain. They are yours to do with as you wish right now, if only you worship me.”

Each temptation provided an opportunity for Jesus to repudiate his identification with humanity. Each temptation was a chance to be something other than human.

You see, to be human is to be limited. The great temptation for all human beings is to be something other than what we are: to be more or less; to be superhuman or subhuman. To be bigger, more self-sufficient and less dependent; to deny our inner struggles and uncertainties; to be masters of our own worlds and control them as we wish. Or, not to live up to that for which we were created; to dumb down; to get by, to stay low, to take the easy path.

That is what the temptation story is all about: will Jesus be human?

Instead of choosing to be the master of his own life, Jesus chose the faithful human course. Instead of seeking to escape his human limits, he embraced them by relying upon God in the midst of his creaturely existence.

In his weakness, Jesus freely chose to remain dependent upon God.

If you go back and read each passage from Deuteronomy that Jesus quoted in response to the temptations, you will discover that each passage points out the dependence of God's people upon their God. Listen to them again.

“And God humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”

“And when the Lord your God brings you into the land which he swore to your fathers, to give you with great and goodly cities which you did not build, and houses full of all good things which you did not fill, and vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant, and when you eat and are full, then take heed lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the house of bondage. You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him.”

“Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me what I have.’”

Each passage warns of the danger in forgetting who is the giver and who is the receiver; who is strong and who is weak; who is the creator and who is the creature.

Jesus remembered. From the beginning of his ministry, he chose that course of dependence and reliance upon God that is ultimately and finally expressed at the cross. He is the one who shows us what being human is all about.

Jesus fought sin and evil on the battleground of his humanity—and so do we.

You would think it easy to be what we are. Yet we struggle to be fully human. We want to exceed the limits placed upon us; we want not to be bound. Or, we fear life and failure and therefore we never risk doing anything significant. How do we know when to push forward, and when to be satisfied with the way things are? Being human is to live between the tension of compliance and freedom, between existing and becoming. That is the struggle of being human.

Our temptation is to be something other than human. Will we embrace our dependence upon God, or will we be self-sufficient? Will we rise to the challenges to our created possibilities that may require us to stretch and risk, or will we deaden ourselves to the pain of failure and shrink into something less than we could be?

Listen to how we typically talk about being human. You hear it when people make a mistake.

- “I baked a three-layer cake today. With frosting, it stacked up one inch high. Well, I guess I’m only human.”
- “I didn’t finish the project today, boss. Pencil leads kept breaking, phone calls kept interrupting, people kept demanding things. There is only so much I can do; after all, I’m only human.”
- “You messed up? You failed at something? Well, welcome to the human race.”

We make our humanity sound like an excuse, don't we? Being human is a put down. Yet in chapter 1 of Genesis, humanity was the crowning achievement of God's creation! God didn't say, "Well, these human beings will do." No, God sounded more like Tony the Tiger: "Wow, these human beings, they're not merely good, they are great!"

Dr. Emilie Townes, in one of her presentations here, observed that Christians have a highly developed theology of sin and a much less developed theology of creation and its goodness. She is right! I believe the best we can be is to be fully human! Created by God, redeemed by God's son, empowered by the Spirit—if that won't do it, what will?

Our humanity is the battleground on which we fight the war of good and evil. I personally don't know anyone who has ever been tempted to change stones to bread. But I know many folks who have been at the end of their ropes grasping for any way out they could find. I don't know any person who has been tempted to take control of all the kingdoms of this world. I do know those who have compromised a sense of justice or accommodated their values to secure some less-than-ultimate good. I don't know any who have been tempted to leap from some pinnacle of a church steeple. I do know those who have used any means to reach their goals, who have purchased their success by deadening themselves to the struggle and pain of being human by their addiction to drugs, to TV, to power.

I have never known any who have confronted the dark prince of this world, the devil himself, but you and I have all confronted that terror of being small, limited, dependent and dying creatures.

How do we win over temptation? We follow the one who was tempted in every way as are we, yet did not sin. We embrace, as did Jesus, our own humanity, and our need for one beyond ourselves. As we place ourselves into the gracious and dependable hands of God, we win. That is what recovering alcoholics have found to be true. All who engage in the spiritual journey come to the reality of an ultimate dependence on God. If you have not discovered this for yourself, you can take that step.

To be human is to live compassionately and passionately even in the presence of oppression or boredom. To be human is to live creatively and faithfully while under pressure to conform or be trivial. To be human is to live gratefully and lovingly in a world bent on taking and having.

The story of Jesus' temptation is a picture for us of what human dependence upon God can be. It is also an invitation to trust in this one who was faithful, and makes being human all it is supposed to be.

The Epistle to the Hebrews summarizes this reality so well: "We have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

As you continue your Lenten journey, may you find strength in the grace of our Lord to live a fully human life, in all the temptations and trials that will come your way.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.