

Convocation Sermon

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Acts 19:1-10 • Luke 4:1-13

“Biding his time.” That’s what one of the older translations says the devil was doing after he departed from Jesus. The New Revised Standard Version is more specific. Not content to twiddle his thumbs or sit on them, the devil evidences a little more vigilance; the devil waits for the opportune moment. The devil and the temptations he personifies abide, waiting for another, better time.

And what better time than now? What better time for temptation than now, when the church wanders its own modern wilderness, seeking its vocation? What better time for temptation than now, when we are so vulnerable?

We are naive to think that temptation is only personal, that the only application of this pericope is the realm of individual responsibility. Institutions, organizations, collectives of human being and endeavor — no less than individuals — are also called by God to particular service. Institutions have vocations, too. Why shouldn’t the temptations apply to the church as much as to each of its members?

Converting stones to bread? What diocese hasn’t taken stock of its real estate with an eye toward liquidation? It’s only good business, which is the secular synonym for stewardship. I do believe in good business, don’t get me wrong. But in these times, when resources are scarce, when that stewardship of abundance that was all the rage a few months ago seems to have gone south with the markets, when operating budgets are suddenly leaner, who isn’t tempted to let money shape mission? The temptation to secure our own survival, or any of our institutions — including and perhaps especially the church — is great, and it is sin. If it is of God the church — our church — will survive and flourish, if not because of us, in spite of us.

Glory and authority? Seen either of them lately? Not around the church, at least not around any I know. There are still a few nice buildings, a few haughty congregations and clergy, impressing themselves, perhaps, but not many others — with the possible exception of brides who want a lovely setting in the right neighborhood for their weddings. Not only has the shine gone off our glory, but our public image is so tarnished even the best of us can’t move without the grimy black of scandal rubbing off on us. Authority? Well, without militia or money the only other source of authority is integrity. The temptation to accrue power and authority to serve our institutional ends is great, and it is sin. Integrity is all the power, all the authority we need. and all that God demands. Without it, nothing else avails.

It’s a little hard for all of us to throw ourselves off the steeple simultaneously, but there are other, even better, ways to put God to the test, to use God to our own ends. Like putting all our faith in our own designs for success. Or any of the other dozens of ways we cook up to quantify God’s grace. Rail all we like about those who equate monetary riches with divine

blessing, call them heretics if we will. But counting butts in pews and bucks in the plate as the indices of successful mission and evangelism is only the same horse in a different color. The temptation to use God as excuse or defense for any human endeavor, no matter how noble, or seemingly just, or seemingly pure, or seemingly true is extremely great, and it is egregious sin. For by our own confession, neither our nobility nor our purity nor our justice nor our truth is ever whole. All is touched and tainted by sin, none is whole or holy, save God.

Fortunately for us as for Jesus, the temptations are a relatively private affair. Temptation does seem to want, even need, a certain discretion. None were privy to Jesus' torment, at least not as recounted in scripture. There are no disciples yet. No witness is named. So how did they know? Did they get it straight from the devil's mouth — was it leaked by the only other credible witness? Did the devil offer it as negative example, with that flattering precautionary warning, "Surely you're smarter than he was; you wouldn't want to come to the same sad end Jesus met, eh? Yes, it's a risk, but you can't win the lottery if you never buy a ticket, now, can you?"

Or did Jesus tell them? Did he let them see his struggle, speak to them openly of his anxieties, invite their help and understanding? Did they see in and through him the harsh realities of human weakness? Was he so transparent the ledgers of his life were bared to their scrutiny as lesson and warning that the only true religion is religion relentlessly dedicated to truth, not as we perceive and frame it, but as God reveals it?

In any case, they knew. And it was of sufficient import to merit the record. Some temptations are common, lurk in the mire of life itself, bide in time, waiting the opportune moment. Some temptations are so common they are not limited to the anointed Christ or the appointed church, but touch us all. Examine any of the sad examples of human failing and there they are. Whether the collapse of an Enron, the destruction of twin towers in lower Manhattan or the fall of a lonely, sexually immature priest, somewhere in the rubble and ruin lurk the same temptations — impervious to punishment or reform, the sole survivor of every earthly disaster, biding in time, waiting for the opportune moment.

If we say we have no sin, if we are so stupid as to believe we can ever eradicate sin, then surely the truth is not in us. The dark, brooding, hideous truth is still biding in the shadows, still waiting the opportune moment. If, then, we cannot destroy it, all we can do is respond to it. All we, like Jesus, can do is answer. It was neither his mission, nor is it ours, to destroy the tempter. In this contest, none is successful. One can only be faithful.

The only antidote to the tyranny of the demonic "if" is the assertion of the creedal "is." Temptation's formula, like every human plan and endeavor, always begins "if you will do this, then that will follow." Faith's formula always answers, "God is faithful; I trust and follow." God is faithful, I trust and follow.

But right now we're not going anywhere. It's hot and bleak, we're tired and we're hungry. We're famished, overwhelmed and powerless. We're not sure we're up to the challenge, not ready to face the wilderness much less find a way through it. All we want is a little bread, a little respect, and an affirming word from God. But it isn't God who has our attention.

The time is right, the moment opportune. Temptation is at hand. The devil, and God, await our answer.