

STANFORD MEMORIAL CHURCH
February 17, 2013

CONFORMING AND TRANSFORMING
George Fitzgerald, S.T.D.

Psalter Lesson: Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16
Gospel Lesson: Luke 4.1-13

Today, as noted in our bulletin, is the first Sunday in Lent. For most Christians the season of Lent began last Wednesday, which we know as Ash Wednesday, and it concludes 40 days later on Easter. Roman Catholics, Episcopalians and Lutherans—as well as an increasing number of Methodists and Presbyterians—observe this day by having a cross of ashes drawn on their forehead. A reminder that from dust we were created and to dust we shall return. Those of a more bacchanalian persuasion tend to think of Lent as beginning on “Fat Tuesday,” the day before Ash Wednesday, and the ultimate expression of their Let the Good Times Roll celebration is to be found in New Orleans with the Marte Gras festival.

The number forty has something of a sacred connotation within both Judaism and Christianity. Noah and his family, along with the animals he assembled, huddled in their boat while the entire earth was covered with water for forty days. Moses led the Jewish people out of Egypt, and for 40 years God sustained them in their wilderness exodus. David, Israel’s greatest king, reigned 40 years. Forty days after Jesus was born his parents took him to the temple in Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. But if we count the days between Ash Wednesday and Easter, the number turns out to be 46, not 40. The church leaders handled this discrepancy by removing the six Sundays from the tabulation. So today is identified not as the first Sunday of Lent, but the first Sunday in Lent.

Traditionally, Christians observe Lent as a time for reflection on the life of Jesus as a model for our life . . . for repentance concerning those things we have done wrong as well as the right things we have failed to do, and for renewal as we move into the celebration of Easter. While the four gospels provide many stories from the ministry of Jesus as a model for our faith, the lectionary always prescribes the story of the temptations of Jesus—found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke—for this first Sunday in Lent. This deliberate placement of the temptation story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry reminds us that it parallels the very first story in the Old Testament or the Hebrew bible: viz., the mythical account of Adam and Eve. In the opening

chapters of the book of Genesis, the creation myth declares that temptation is part and parcel of life itself. The mythological Adam and Eve are placed in an idyllic Garden of Eden. The scenery is exquisite; the weather is perfect; food is ample; and they don't even have to worry about clothes. But there is one caveat, one prohibition: they are not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This of course becomes fertile soil for temptation. The one thing that cannot be done becomes a challenge, an obsession. . . the one thing that becomes increasingly desired. Their desire, their "what if" inquisitiveness is relieved by the serpent, extending its beguiling fruit and murmuring, "why should your desires be denied? Why should your gifts be restricted? . . . Why should you not become as God?" As we all know, Adam and Eve succumb to temptation, which results in a rupture of their relationship with God as well as with one another.

When we turn to the story of Jesus, the writers of the three gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke want us to know that Jesus, unlike Eve and Adam, resists temptation. Like the Adam and Eve story, the ministry of Jesus is initiated by a miraculous, divine encounter. It begins with Jesus joining many of his neighbors by going to the Jordan River to be baptized by a prophetic holy man called John the Baptist. But when Jesus emerges from the water and proceeds to pray, John the Baptist, as well as all the other men and women present are startled and stunned as, "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon (Jesus) in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven declares, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"(Luke 21b,22). This was a baptism never to be forgotten, and if anyone here has experienced such a baptism, I would like to talk to you after the service. This spiritually transforming moment marked the commencement of the public ministry of Jesus at 30 years of age. Moreover, metaphorically speaking, the launching of Jesus' ministry was a Garden of Eden experience . . . the voice of God directly speaking to Jesus as well as the assembled others who had come to be baptized. And Jesus, like Adam and Eve before him, discovers that the snake of temptation is near at hand. This transition is described by two of the most incomprehensible and seemingly outrageous verses in the Bible which declares, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil" (Luke 4.1,2). It does not make sense; what's going on here? The same Spirit that declared Jesus to be God's beloved Son now leads him into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. Here we come face to face with the basic conundrum of religion: If God is infinite goodness, all powerful and all knowing why is there any—or, so much—evil, pain and tragedy in the world? Why are almost two dozen children in the presumed safety to their Connecticut classroom shot by a disturbed young man? . . . why are thousands of children

throughout the world starving to death at this very moment? . . . why are so many women in the world subjected to abuse and violence? In short, “Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?” As far as I know, no one has provided a convincing answer to this fundamental, existential inquiry. Perhaps the closest we can come to answering this question is to acknowledge there is yet no acceptable answer . . . that we know there is both goodness and badness in our world . . . and sometimes we experience the goodness of God sustaining us when nothing else can . . . and we live in the hope that ultimately the goodness of God will prevail.

Temptation is thoroughly woven into the entire fabric of our existence. We want, and believe we deserve, something more or better. It starts at birth, as infants reaching out for everything we can get their hands on. Once we start walking we are tempted to run across the street; when we enter a candy or toy store, we are tempted by everything and want it all. During school years we are tempted to do whatever it takes to be popular.. When we reach our midlife crisis we may bemoan all the opportunities that have passed us by, and we find ourselves revisiting tempting unfilled dreams, job possibilities, perhaps a new, stimulating relationship is called for. Even at the end, we may be tempted to call into question the finality of death by investing in having our body frozen so that it may restored to life once medical advances have discovered the key to such a resuscitation.

The image of Jesus being tempted by a satanic figure or the devil does not resonate to us today, as we regularly tend to diminish and ridicule the somewhat comical image of a guy in a red suit with a pointed tail and carrying a pitchfork. Whenever we encounter such a representation we are not sure whether to laugh or shake our heads in dismay. But I suggest we set this burlesque figure aside and agree that—regardless of how it is understood or portrayed—there can be no question that some kind of force or power of evil is very much well and alive in the world, permeating our existence and taking such forms as: starvation and crippling illnesses; assorted forms of genocide (or so-called ethnic cleansing); childhood fatalities; the abuse and murder of innocent individuals; the rapacious exploitation and destruction of the environment . . . to name just a few, and undoubtedly a good many others readily come to mind from our personal experiences.

The story of the Temptation of Jesus provides us with a revealing glimpse into the nature and dynamics of temptation. To begin with, the devil does not tempt us to steal garbage cans. No, it is much more subtle and winsome than that. Temptation is always beguiling, always appealing. . promising something better than what we have, moving beyond perceived limitations. If we succumb, our lives will be richer, more fulfilling. . Undoubtedly envied by many. Regardless of their form or appearance,

however, temptations may be identified as essentially falling into one of three categories. The first of the devil's challenges to Jesus is well known to us and may be identified as **Material Wealth**: "command these stones to become a loaf of bread" (Luke 4.3). Surely if he could change stones to bread, he could also build chariots, produce jewelry of precious stones and gold, and erect immense pleasure palaces. There would be no limit to Jesus' wealth; even Bill Gates would look like a piker.

Next comes the second temptation, which may be placed under the heading of **Power**. The devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and promises him power over all of them. He will rule in majesty, protected by his military might and have courtiers who will grant his every wish. Examples of absolute power corrupting run the gamut from Roman emperors (who declare themselves gods) to Napoleon Bonaparte, to a slew of current dictators in the world. Perhaps the obsession of hanging on to power contributes to the fascination with the fact that the resignation of Pope Benedict is the first to occur in 600 years of papal history. And who has not heard Lord Acton's oft quoted phrase, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Perhaps former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger may have been trying for a more contemporary spin when he declared power to be the ultimate aphrodisiac.

Then, for the third temptation, the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, challenging him to throw himself down, for surely as the Son of God he will be protected by the angels (Luke 4.9-11). This temptation we recognize as **Fame**. This gift belongs to the charismatic individuals who can persuade thousands, sometimes millions to follow him or her. Next week we will be honoring some of these paragons of fame with the Academy Awards ceremony.

So beguiling, so appealing, and if we ask why Jesus did not succumb to the devil's wily enticement, I suspect it had something to do with his reading the small print. Though Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's tragedy of Faust was not published until 1808, Jesus readily recognized what happens when someone sells his or her soul to Satan, or the devil. This was the "catch," the small print. In one way or another, in every temptation, the devil was saying, "If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours" (Luke 4.7). Jesus saw beneath the surface façade, recognizing that, ultimately, all these things belong to God, not the devil.

If we turn to the dictionary, to seek further light on our understanding of the subject we are informed that temptation has to do with being tempted, especially to evil, and it is a cause or occasion of enticement (Webster's *Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*). This accords pretty much with the story of the Temptations of Jesus. But there seems to be an opening here which allows us to

consider an alternative possibility. What I would like to suggest is that we make space for—what might be called--temptations for good. In effect, we need to make a distinction between what might be called “Conforming” and “Transforming” temptations. Up to this point, what we have been talking about—the temptations of wealth, power and fame--might best be described as “Conforming Temptations.” Once they have been attained, individuals who appear to others to have reached their goals of wealth, power or fame become insatiable. They never have enough. They become ends in themselves. More needs to be achieved, and what has been accumulated must be constantly monitored and protected.

By way of contrast, and it is a distinction that makes all the difference in the world, “Transforming Temptations” are those which are able to overcome making wealth, power and fame as ends in themselves; instead they become resources serving a greater goal. Life is enhanced rather than being exploited or destroyed. The so-called robber barons of the early nineteenth century provide some fascinating examples of this transformation. Andrew Carnegie, after he had accumulated his millions (and many would say in dubious ways), became increasingly committed to the proposition that it was a sin for a wealthy man to die rich; his ideal, as he established countless libraries across the country, was to die without any money. Collis Huntington, by contrast, went to his grave committed to accumulating as much wealth as possible with his associates Crocker, Hopkins, and Stanford.. He may have almost jumped out of his grave when his heirs established the remarkable Huntington Library in Pasadena, using much of the vast wealth for the benefit of the greater community. Then there are Collis Huntington’s cohorts whose spirit infuses the campus surrounding us at this very moment. The tragic death of their beloved, only child transformed Leland and Mary Stanford’s conforming commitment to wealth and power, with the establishment of a great university. In our own day, many would point to the Bill and Melinda Gates as a model transforming the conforming temptation to garner as much wealth as possible by contributing billions of dollars to the eradication of certain deadly diseases as well as improving our educational system.

Conforming temptations buy into the demonic delusion that this world belongs for us to enjoy, and our happiness will be determined and measured in proportion to the wealth, power and fame we are able to accumulate and display. Transforming temptations are rooted in the rebuke Jesus gave the devil when he said, It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God’ (Luke 14.8). Or, in the lovely opening words of our Psalter lesson for today, “You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust” (Psalm 91.1). Conforming temptations approach our Garden of

Eden as a place to be exploited, to get as much as one can. Transforming temptations have to do with a stewardship perspective, acknowledging that our Garden of Eden belongs to God and seeks opportunities to make it a better place for everyone in the community . . . by feeding the hungry, pursuing the pathways to peace, caring for the destitute, healing the injured.

In many traditions the Lenten season that precedes Easter is observed by denying ourselves something we find quite appealing—but not always the best thing for us. So pledges are taken to renounce such things as chocolates, alcohol, meat and so forth. I suggest that we also take on a transforming approach to temptations that mislead us. The needs and opportunities almost jump out at us—that we engage our time and resources to enrich our community, our relationship and, ultimately ourselves--knowing indeed that these transforming actions not only enrich the fragile Garden of Eden in which we have been placed but also enable us to discover the true value of our lives and why we were put here in the first place. Amen.