

Lent 1C

Deuteronomy 26, Romans 10, Luke 4

"*The Temptation to Reject God*"

Rev Seth D. Jones

Lent is a time of self-reflection with the purpose of more closely and deeply understanding the presence of *God* in our lives.

We do this through

prayer,

fellowship,

reading of Scripture,

worship

and meditation.

There is nothing different about what we do during Lent than any other time of year, but the focus is changed.

It is a time of repentance, a time of finding out where we are out of alignment with the will of *God* and why.

It is a time of seeking and giving forgiveness, even at the risk of diminished self-importance and standing in the eyes of others.

It is a time of recognizing what it means to truly submit to the gentle yoke of a life in *Christ*.

During Lent, we are confronted more deeply by those things that would draw us away from *God*.

In other words, Lent asks us to pay attention to

what tempts us,

what tests us,

in our relationship to *God* and *Christ*.

Our lectionary readings for Lent all allow for a deeper exploration of two things:

1) the nature of temptation and

2) the promises of *God* which allow for us to stand strong in the face of those temptations.

Our readings can help us find out where *God* is by exploring those things which draw us into where *God* is not.

We are all on a spiritual pilgrimage together, so it does not really matter what the level of your temptations are.

What matters is our learning where and how we are tempted.

Overt temptations are pretty easy to talk about;

I could stand up here and talk to you about overcoming simple, obvious temptations like

chocolate,

sex,

food,

drugs and alcohol.

Many of these kinds of temptations fall under a more expansive category of addiction,

and as the 12-step programs will tell you, addiction is always a symptom of a deeper, spiritual problem.

The object of your desire is not the problem.

The problem is how and where your relationship with *God* has broken down.

So as we explore temptation during Lent, we will be looking for deeper, more insidious ways we are tempted and tested.

This week, we will look at the temptation to reject *God*.

Jesus in the desert is tempted and tested by the devil, and he is able to stand strong against those temptations by relying on the promises of *God*.

On a personal note, I am hesitant to speak of evil as a personality, to name it Satan. I prefer to speak rather of the demonic or the satanic, as forces rather than a personality.

However, I recognize evil as personal and directed, and often not merely the result of humans being bad to other humans.

Jesus' temptation in the desert shows us clearly that the demonic and the satanic does not challenge us in a random manner.

Rather, we are challenged at the very heart of what we consider to be the core of our being and reality.

Contrarily, each of those challenges, temptations and tests are countered by a promise of God.

If God is the one who is allowing the tests and temptations, then we will not be tested without the capacity to resist by the grace and power of God.

The promise which counters the temptation to resist God is encompassed by Paul in our reading today.

Paul says we are justified by the fact of our faith and confession of this faith.

The promise here, however, is not our belief or our capacity to confess that faith.

Our belief and confession are the result of the promise.

The promise is what Paul quotes from Deuteronomy:

*"The Word is near you, even in your mouth and in your heart."*

Our confession and faith affirm the promise of God, just as the Israelites affirm this promise every Passover by reciting the history of their people, which begins, *"My ancestor was a wandering Aramean"*, as our reading from Deuteronomy discloses.

God is present with us in our deepest being.

Because of God's presence in the workings of the created order, because of the fact of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and because of what has been said of our relationship with God in Scripture, we know God is near us, even in all we say and in our very will and being.

The temptation to reject God asks us to turn away from the promise that God is close to us, to turn away from God's voice and will for our lives.

The rejection of God happens slowly and subtly most of the time. It is usually not a single moment where one rejects God outright, though this happens as well.

The temptation to reject God can happen suddenly.

Many people think Charles Darwin did not believe in God because of his discoveries regarding evolution and how the world came to be.

But this is not true, as with many stories with agendas behind them.

Darwin rejected belief and God when he watched his beloved daughter die from disease, in pain and great suffering.

As I have said before, suffering is the single best reason to believe and the single best reason to not believe.

More often, the temptation to reject God takes the form of a slow, eroding failure of trust on our part.

A death here,  
an injury to the soul there,  
a sickness or deformity in this child  
or that husband,

a series of unfortunate events  
which lead to the final realization God could care less about you  
and your life.

And then one day you awake  
and don't even really care about God anymore.  
And by this rational one rejects God.

Jesus is tempted by the devil to reject God in Luke's account  
today.

The progression gives us some clues in how we reject God.  
Our rejection occurs on the fundamental level of where we place  
the source of our provision, what we need to live from day to day;  
the source of our power, who we get what we need from;  
and our protection, who we rely on to keep us safe.

The loss of any one of these in our lives -  
provision, power and protection -  
means the collapse of those things  
which give us hope, comfort and simple survival.

Jesus' first temptation is to turn a rock into bread.  
After 40 days of not eating, Jesus is famished and overwhelmed  
with hunger.

In Matthew and Luke, this is the first temptation.

It goes right to the heart of Jesus' primary concern at  
this moment.

Where will I get food?

The devil knows Jesus is perfectly capable of turning a rock into  
bread and thereby providing for himself an end to his hunger.  
Jesus faces a choice here.

The choice is whether to take on the power of God and  
simply act to satisfy his personal hunger,  
or to do what God asked the people of Israel to do -  
trust absolutely that God will provide.

In the Exodus story, God provided manna for the wandering  
Israelites.

Every morning, manna appeared to the Israelites while they were  
in the desert.

Every evening the manna would disappear,  
which required of the wandering Israelite nation  
a daily act of trust that God would again provide.

Jesus chooses to trust that the God who provided for God's  
people would also provide for God's Son, in whom God is well  
pleased.

To reject the promise of God's provision is a rejection of  
God.

To reject God's promise is to deny our trust in God.

About 9 months after RJ was born, she developed whooping  
cough.

So did Kate.

Whooping cough is a horrible, weakening sickness.  
I had just started a new job because Kate and I lost our  
jobs a month before.

We were living in the commune at the time.

Between losing a job,  
starting a new one in a massive corporation,  
a sick daughter and wife all at the same time,  
I was an angry, broken person.  
Nothing helped.

I use the story as an example of the scale of testing which can  
occur in one's life.

At the time, I was not a Christian anymore.

I had no God to be angry at,  
but I did feel rejected by a God I didn't think was there.

My ability to trust not only God but life itself completely eroded.  
Any conception I had of God disappeared.

I gave in to the temptation.  
It seemed easier that way, but in the long run, it wasn't.

In the second temptation,  
Jesus is taken up to see the kingdoms of the world.  
*"If only you will bow down to me, you can have all of this"*  
Satan tells Jesus.

Again there is a choice here for Jesus.  
Jesus has a choice between the power of the world  
and the power of God.

To choose the power of the world,  
it is not a stretch to imagine Jesus had the charisma and personal  
draw to be the next Alexander the Great.

But if Jesus had chosen to be the next Alexander the  
Great,  
we would never be able to see Jesus at work.

There would be no difference between the Christian walk  
and the walk of the powers that be.

From our perspective, it would make more sense for Jesus  
to institute a top-down approach  
to establish the kingdom of God.

Totalitarian regimes are always more efficient  
and more effective in accomplishing their goals.  
Whoever won whatever challenge or battle would  
be what defines a Christian.

Think about that in relation to Christian history.  
The implication here is that choosing human ways of power  
is also a choice for the satanic  
and a rejection of God.

Jesus chooses the power of God instead.  
God's power is from the bottom up.

Power on God's terms is a downward, failing enterprise from our  
perspective.

God's power leads to  
betrayal,  
rejection,  
the Cross,  
death,  
suffering.

Relying on God's power means we may never see  
'success',  
'victory',  
'fulfillment' from our perspective.

Jesus chooses the path of the suffering servant,  
the one who is completely subject to the ways of God's power.

As humans, we have always worshiped power.  
We want to be near it.

But God's power leads in one direction -  
straight to the Cross.

It is as true for us as it was for Jesus  
Christ.

When confronted with God's power,  
we will always be confronted with our own attempts at power.  
In other words, we will be tempted to reject God.

Jesus' final temptation is at the wall of the Temple.  
The devil tells Jesus to throw himself off  
and let the angels bear him up.

Conveniently, Satan leaves off a key part of the verse  
from Psalm 91, which he is quoting here.

Satan does not say,  
*"For he shall give his angels charge over you,  
to keep you in all his ways."*

Satan just says,

*"For he shall give his angels charge over you."*

Satan doesn't want Jesus to be kept in the ways of the Lord.

He wants Jesus to reject the Lord.

Isn't this always the case with temptation and testing, though?

We always face the moment when we can choose the ways in which God keeps us and protects us, or we can choose some other way.

*"I just want out of this horrible situation. I would do anything to make it end."*

And lo, an opportunity arises which gives you an out.

How do we discern whether it is of God or a test?

In order to find an answer,

and I am not in any way suggesting this is easy,

we must find out who is doing the testing -

God or us.

Jesus' answer to Satan is

*"You shall not test the Lord your God."*

When I was a kid and a crisis was approaching of whatever sort,

I would make promises to God,

usually for either my own protection and safety or someone close to me.

*"If only you, God, would not allow such and such to happen, I will promise to do such and such."*

Is this not a test of God?

If God did not come through,

I can stand justified in my rejection of God, or at least in my not fulfilling what I promised.

What Jesus is saying here is to not deliberately put God's willful desires for God's people to a test.

Testing God implies a deep mistrust of what God is willing and able to do for us.

Further, it places all the responsibility with God, not with us.

Adam Clarke, the great Methodist commentator of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century says,

*"The path of duty is the way of safety."*

This scene from Jesus' temptation makes me think of a job I used to have as an apartment caretaker.

It was hard work.

I was painter, groundskeeper, repair guy, pool cleaner, and refrigerator mover.

I didn't like my boss, who was arrogant and mean.

The people I worked with bothered me.

I grew to hate my job.

So I hired a job-finding service.

They found me a job with Spinoza.

They made talking teddy-bears for hospitals, orphanages, shelters and schools.

I was hired to sell those talking bears over the phone.

My job at Spinoza was so much worse than what I was doing before,

the only way I could find some solace, some relief from the stress,

was to walk around the edge of the 12 story building which housed the company.

Every day, it was less stressful to test myself and God by walking around the edge of the building

than to be on the phones trying to sell talking teddy-bears.

What I learned,  
because my mean, arrogant boss gave me my caretaker job back  
after a miserable 3 months,  
was to never leave a job until you find something you love about  
working there.

It took me another year and a half to feel that way about  
caretaking apartments,  
but I did  
and it was one of the best jobs I have ever had.

God's protection is not necessarily a protection against injury,  
accident and disease.

Rather, God's protection is the trust that whatever occurs,  
God will turn the outcome to the good of the Kingdom of God.

And that finally is the key to all of this.  
Our capacity to withstand the temptation to reject God  
stands or falls on our ability to trust God.  
Trust in God is a progressive thing  
and can only be accomplished by doing it.

The more we trust in God,  
the more we submit to that trust just as Jesus  
does in today's reading.  
The more we trust in God,  
the more we are capable of withstanding all the  
tests and challenges to our faith we confront on a  
daily basis.

This is hard work,  
resisting the temptation and tests against our trust in God.  
It is work which creates in us a deep hunger for fulfillment.

As Americans, we want that hunger to be fulfilled NOW  
and we will often do anything to fill it.

It is hard to resist.

These days, we no longer even perceive our desire for fulfillment  
as temptation or test.

We have a strong assurance in the simple fact of Jesus  
Christ, though.

Jesus' willingness to experience what we experience  
means we can trust God  
and resist the regular tests that ask us to reject God.

We can resist not because we are able,  
but because Jesus already did resist.

We can do it because Christ did it.

When we are faced with the temptation to reject God,  
rely on the promise God is with us, as Moses and Paul tell us.

Trust in the God who has given to you all you need to survive.

Trust in the God who is the true power of life, the power  
of love and sacrifice in a world which demands  
ruthlessness and self-fulfillment.

Trust, people of God, in the God who protects your  
soul and your future for the sake of God's kingdom.

Amen.