

Strengthening our Moral Compass Reading: Luke 4:1-13; Psalm 91 Lent 1/C 3/9/25
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"After his baptism, 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." (Lk. 4:1)

The operating word today is PEIRAZO, the Greek word which means to test, to put on trial, to tempt. While our gospel story translates this word as being tempted, a better translation would be to test or to put on trial. After Jesus had been baptized and is filled with the Holy Spirit, he is driven out into the wilderness where he is put through a variety of tests to determine his fitness for ministry. Does he have the internal discipline to choose rightly? Is his moral compass pointing toward heaven or is it pointing in the opposite direction toward the powers of the world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God? While he seems to have succeeded in passing the initial testing, he will later be faced with many challenges during his three-year earthly ministry which concludes with his crucifixion.

In the Greco-Roman world, testing was often associated with refining or proving one's character. In the New Testament, *peirazo* usually refers to situations that tests a person's character, faith, or endurance. This kind of testing can refer to external trials such as the ones faced by Jesus, or internal temptations that happen to us from bodily cravings, addictions, material desires, or a needy ego. When looking at what is currently going on in our country, it seems as if temptation is winning the game and that many have lost their moral compass altogether. A moral compass is "a set of beliefs and values that help guide ethical decisions, judgments, and behavior. It is an internal sense of right and wrong." Today, where falling into despair is a temptation, I would like to talk about strengthening our moral compass. I will use today's gospel story for insight.

In the 'temptation' story according to Luke, Jesus faces a choice between embracing the kingdom of God or the kingdoms of this world. The kingdoms of this world are quite enticing. They can offer power, riches, comforts, financial security, and even temporary happiness. There is nothing wrong with wanting a better life for ourselves or for our loved ones. However, choosing the kingdoms of this world over the kingdom of God often comes at a great cost: a cost to the environment, a cost to our integrity, a cost to securing justice and peace for all people, a cost to our health (both physically and spiritually), and a cost to the marginalized whom Luke refers to as the lost, the lonely, the lame, and the left behind.

The first temptation that Jesus faced is to satisfy the physical demands of his body; in this case turning a stone into bread. The issue here is not feeding those who are hungry. In fact, Jesus fed thousands of people during his ministry. The point here is that Jesus truly believed that there is more to life than just satisfying physical needs. His relationship with God and the Spirit was more important than fleeting physical needs.

Jesus re-affirms this priority to God in his Sermon on the Mount when he tells his disciples: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Mt. 6)

And yet here we are, filling up garages and storage sheds with too much stuff, wasting food that we no longer want, and filling up landfills with left over clothes that are no longer in fashion. The average American throws away over 100 lbs. of clothing each year, only 1% of which will get recycled into new garments. Shockingly, one third of all food produced for human consumption is wasted each year, which is responsible for 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions. When is enough, enough?

I recently read a story about a man at a fast-food restaurant who was reading a newspaper filled with articles convincing people that their sole goal in life is to acquire as much as they can during their short stay on this planet. Suddenly, a homeless woman who was limping approached his table and asked for two dollars to get something to eat. He quickly checked his wallet and realized that he had only a one-dollar bill and several twenties. Feeling virtuous, he decided to give her the twenty but she immediately handed it back to him and said: "I only need two dollars. What would I do with this?" He was stunned. He quickly handed her the one-dollar bill and then emptied the coins from his pocket. She thanked him and slowly shuffled over to the counter, ordered the smallest item on the menu, and limped outside to eat it. He could not get over the fact that she had turned down his offer of a twenty-dollar bill because she "only needed two dollars." Was she so confused by her life on the streets that she didn't know its true value? Or had she kept her moral compass and sense of dignity intact, and decided she would only accept the two dollars she had asked for? Jesus said: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Mt. 6:33)

In the second temptation, Jesus was tested on issues regarding power, authority, worldly success, and riches. Would he sell his soul to the devil in order to have these things? Absolutely not! Sadly in our country today, many of our leaders (even those who claim to be Christian) have sold their soul to the devil in order to satisfy their desire for power and riches. It seems that as a person's thirst for power increases, their moral sense often diminishes. Recently, Bishop Budde of Washington D.C. pleaded with our President to "have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now." She specifically mentioned LGBTQ children and migrant workers who are now being persecuted and fear for their safety. This plea for mercy was viewed by some as an insult to the President who demanded an apology. There were others who sent death threats to the bishop. You see, when you worship power, - compassion and mercy will look like sins. "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Jesus said: "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." (Lk. 4)

The third temptation brings attention to how evil uses distortions and lies. Here, Jesus is encouraged to test God by throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the temple. The devil reassures him by quoting Scripture: "God will command his angels concerning you, to protect you." He is quoting from Psalm 91, but only partially. He leaves out the part about how a person first needs to make God one's refuge. Half-truths, lying, slandering, misleading headlines, deception, and fake news have become part and parcel of the dis-information age in which we now live. "This constant lying is not aimed at making the people believe a lie, but at ensuring that no one believes anything anymore. A people that can no longer distinguish between truth and lies cannot distinguish between right and wrong." (Hannah Arendt) Because it is difficult to discern the truth, our moral compass can become confused. As a result, we often make decisions based on what we already know and what makes us comfortable rather than do the hard work of investigating the full story.

So how exactly do we strengthen our moral compass in these chaotic times? Here are a few suggestions:

*Rehearse your baptismal vows on a regular basis, not just in church. Remember, before struggling in the wilderness, Jesus had just been baptized and was able to hold fast to his identity as God's son. Do you hold fast to your identity as God's beloved child? If so, you have nothing to fear. Do you "renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?" If so, you will expose them and resist them. Do you "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" If so, you will pray for your enemies. There is always a temptation for Christians to forget their baptismal identity by trying to be successful rather than faithful. It is easy to be dazzled by the riches of the world, to make compromises when we are called to stand firm, and to avoid the path of sacrifice and suffering for the sake of comfort. So I suggest opening the Book of Common Prayer from time to time and rehearsing your baptismal covenant as a way to "resist those sinful desires that draw you from the love of God." (BCP 301-303)

*Guard your heart. To guard one's heart means to avoid exposure or attention to negative environments. For instance, if a person is beginning the path to sobriety, the last place he needs to go to meet his friends is at a bar. If the fear mongering news is making you angry or anxious or despairing, you need to shut it off as a way of guarding your heart. Try to hang out with hopeful people, people who love God and neighbor and are willing to witness to the good news of God in Christ.

*Roll up your sleeves and work for the Kingdom. Don't just rehearse a Facebook post. Give time & money to support charities, human rights organizations, and religious institutions that preach the good news. Step up and volunteer. Shower others with acts of kindness and generosity. Speak the truth in the Public Square. Cultivate hope for the future and listen carefully to those who differ from you. We need to be seekers and participants of the truth, not just partisan automatons who have already made up their minds.

*Open up a space for the Holy Spirit to work in your life. Remember, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit when he was tested in the wilderness. One of the ways we can arrange our heart, mind, body and soul to be receptive to God's grace is to practice the spiritual disciplines. These disciplines include but are not limited to meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. So instead of giving up something for Lent this year, take upon yourself an intention to be faithful in prayer, service, and fellowship. Spend extra time engaging in spiritual practices. They will certainly strengthen your moral compass and give you the wisdom to choose rightly.

For modern day Christians, the story of Jesus being tested in the wilderness seems unreal. However, those same temptations are very much present in our country and in our personal lives today. If this Lent we choose to be intentional and receptive to the grace of God, we will encounter a faithful God who leads us not only into the wilderness, but also through the wilderness.