Sunday, February 25, 1996
DEALING WITH TEMPTATION
Matthew 4:1-11

The journey through life is seldom a straight one from birth to death. There are side trips and detours — some of them you choose, others are not planned. The life journey of Jesus was no exception.

Last week, in the first sermon of this series, we looked at his journey up the mountain. Three of his disciples were invited to accompany him. It was an unusual trip for all of them. As a result of this side trip, the direction of Jesus' ministry was affirmed, and he gained new strength for the continuation of his journey. The three disciples came to understand him and his ministry in a new way. They also learned when to listen and when to talk.

Today, we are looking at another side journey of Jesus. This time he went alone, and instead of going up on a mountain, he went into the desert, or what the Bible calls the wilderness. When I say he went alone, that's not quite correct. He took with him a strong faith in God and a knowledge of God's teachings as recorded in the Old Testament. The journey up the mountain took place near the end of his ministry. Its purpose was to take time out to determine whether or not the direction and destination of his life's journey were still on track.

However, his earlier journey alone into the desert, which we are considering today, took place at the very beginning of his ministry. Its purpose was to consider what direction his life's journey would take at the outset.

Here's how it came about: When he was baptized by John, Jesus felt called by God for a special purpose. But how would he accomplish what God wanted him to do? How should he use God's power that he had so intensely experienced? How should he use the gifts that God had given him? These are questions all of us face in one way or another on our life's journey. All of these questions involve choices we need to make.

Is there anyone here today, or who is listening on the radio or watching on television, who has not faced the agony of choice? Which road among many should you choose for your life's journey? What's the best way to use the gifts God has given you? To be sure, your choices, and the resulting temptations that grow out of those choices, might not seem to be of the same magnitude as those that faced Jesus, but you know what temptation is.

Before we consider more carefully the three choices which Jesus faced when he was in the wilderness, I need to make several comments that apply to all of them.

The gospel stories say, "Jesus was led by the Spirit (meaning the Holy Spirit or God's Spirit) into the wilderness, to be tempted by the devil. He fasted 40 days and 40 nights, and afterward, he was hungry."

"Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." Jesus felt a need to be alone as he tried to figure out what God's will was for him in his ministry. The fact that he was tempted was part of the process in his trying to determine the direction of his life's journey. It is frequently the most committed among us who face the most difficult choices and therefore the most alluring temptations.

Temptation, therefore, indicates strength, not weakness. We are usually tempted to do that which is within our capacity.

Therefore, the greater the capacity, the greater the temptation. The seriousness of the struggle in the wilderness is a testimony to Jesus' power and commitment. The tempter doesn't waste time on weaklings. It is the very good who are tempted, not the borderline good.

One more comment needs to be made about the attractive temptations that came to Jesus and which can come to us. They do not usually involve an obvious or undisguised evil.

For example, most of us are never tempted to commit armed robbery. But there's plenty of skimming of large sums of money that goes on that is not at all obvious and is well disguised.

Those who do the skimming have probably convinced themselves that they are doing nothing wrong and may have even convinced themselves that they are doing good. The worst evil is always done in the name of the good. Every time the church has burned heretics at the stake, the people doing it were convinced they were doing God's work. The Nazi killing of the Jews was done in the name of the good.

In our time, the most dangerous and alluring temptations are those when we convince ourselves that the endeavors are reasonable and promise good results before we put our minds and hands to them.

"Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Now, lest you be misled by some popular pictures of the devil as a horned creature with a fiendish face carrying a pitchfork, this is not the kind of tempter Jesus was confronting in the gospel stories.

Let's take a little side trip now and talk about the devil for a moment. There has always been a lot of fascination with the devil. Maybe that's why some colleges and universities use some form of the devil as an athletic mascot. Somewhere I read that there are at least 21 senior and junior colleges that do this. These schools range from the DePaul Blue Demons and the Duke Blue Devils to the Dillard University Devilettes and the Wake Forest Demon Deacons. There are a number of American manufacturing companies that also use the devil in their trade names.

In spite of this, perhaps the devil needs to be introduced to some of you who may think that you have not met him or her. Or maybe your idea or concept of the devil is too small. Here are four brief comments about the devil that will help.

First, the devil is usually pictured as a person because evil is experienced and takes place in very personal ways.

Second, we need to think of the devil as having a separate existence, not because evil exists outside of us, but because evil is in us and is also something greater than us.

Third, the devil is often described as a fallen angel because, as I said earlier, the worst evil comes from the highest motivations within us, which have been corrupted. The worst evil is done under the guise of the good.

Fourth, the devil or evil is exceedingly subtle, rarely suggesting that you do anything bad, but invariably suggesting that we do something quite reasonable, that which is disguised as the

good. And that's precisely what is going on in this story of the temptations that were considered by Jesus.

He is wrestling with what the will of God is for him in his ministry, and he is presented with three very attractive options. All three have immense possibilities for good.

Remember the temptation facing Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as described in the book of Genesis. The serpent promises them that if they eat of the forbidden tree, they will be like God. What higher goal could one have? There is no hint of sin or shame in that desire.

Jesus had before him three intriguing offers. The first, to turn these stones into bread. Remember, Jesus was very hungry. He had not eaten for days. But it was not only to satisfy his own physical hunger that made the temptation so powerful. In a world of tremendous hunger, why not feed people? All around him, people were starving. How could he preach good news to the poor if they were hungry? It's hard to say to a group of starving people, "I am the bread of life. Those who come to me shall never hunger."

It's a seductive temptation. Satisfy people's physical needs first. Yet deep down, Jesus knew that food to satisfy physical hunger is never enough. We do not live by bread alone. Jesus also remembered the story of the children of Israel. It was only after they were filled with manna that they rebelled. Only after their stomachs were full did they doubt their high calling.

This temptation had another element to it. Like us, Jesus sometimes had his doubts. Was he truly the "Son of God?" Notice that the tempter prefaced both the first and the second temptation with that teasing question: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."

Thus, the second temptation was connected to the first in that it was about his calling, his identity. Remember, not many days earlier, he had been baptized and had heard a voice from heaven assuring him that he was indeed God's chosen one. So the second temptation: "If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down and see if God will save you."

It's a strong temptation. "Will God always be there for me? Why not find out? Jump off the pinnacle of the temple and see if God will protect me. Then, if something happens, I can always blame God. It will be God's fault, not mine."

It's a temptation for all of us. We want to either blame God or the devil or someone else for whatever happens to us and avoid personal responsibility for our choices. Jesus, however, refused to turn over responsibility for his actions to anyone else. He refused to jump off the pinnacle of the temple.

Like the first temptation, the second one also had its social implications. What a crowd-pleaser. Suppose Jesus made the jump and didn't get hurt. Certainly, the crowd would be impressed with a cluster of angels coming out of nowhere and catching him just before he hit the ground. Wouldn't that prove to people that he was God's chosen one? People love drama and sensationalism, but Jesus knew it wouldn't produce committed followers. He dealt with this temptation by calling on his faith and his knowledge of God as revealed in the Hebrew tradition. He said, "It is written, you shall not tempt the Lord your God." A good paraphrase of his response is: "You shall not try to force the hand of God to work in the way you think God ought to work." In other words, do not attempt to manipulate God for your own ends.

The third temptation has the tempter taking Jesus to a high place and showing him all the kingdoms of the world. “All these I will give to you,” said the tempter, “if you will fall down and worship me.”

Here’s the temptation to enter the political arena and save the world in that way. Take over the government of the world. Force people to be good. Do away with hunger, crime, oppression, and disregard for life by using dictatorial power. But again, Jesus refused the temptation. He knew that the kingdoms of this world and the glory thereof were not the devil’s to give to anyone. God had not turned the world over to the evil one. Jesus also knew that God and God alone is to be worshipped. The worship of anything less always leads to disaster.

All three temptations have this in common: they are temptations to take a shortcut to satisfy a dominating desire — a shortcut to accomplish what you believe to be God’s purpose. Shortcuts are not always bad, but before you take one, you need to ask: Am I doing this for me, or is it for God?

Jesus’s temptations did not end once he left the wilderness. Again and again, he was tested. Determining and trying to do God’s will is never easy for any one of us. That’s because God never lays out the complete journey of your life for you to see ahead of time. There are many forks in the road, and it’s not always easy to decide which one to choose. It’s not always a simple question of right versus wrong, but the tough choices are those which pit one “right” against another.

Furthermore, if you think of yourself as a good person with a deep core of ethical principles, that doesn’t mean you will have fewer difficult choices than others, but quite the opposite. Those who want to be true to their ethical principles are apt to agonize over choices that other people don’t consider as problems or temptations.

As you continue to face temptations in your life, this story about the early temptations of Jesus implies that you ask yourself these questions before you make a decision too quickly as you face each temptation:

Am I taking this road mostly because it is a shortcut? And if so, am I doing this for my benefit or for God’s?
Am I using the gifts God has given me so that God’s will is served, or am I using my gifts primarily to promote my own interests and status?
A friend of mine who is a very successful person said to me one day, “Otis, I think I’ve just about figured out what God is going to ask each one of us at the end of this life’s journey — there will be two questions: First, God will ask, ‘What have you done with all I’ve given you?’ That’s the easy one. And the second is tougher: ‘Who did you do it for?’” Amen.