

Tripped Up

Psalm 91:1-2; 9-16: Luke 4:1-13

The title of this morning's message is from a free translation of Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 1. The New Living Translation, which describes itself as a dynamically equivalent translation in the Evangelical Tradition, has it, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge cloud of witnesses in the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up"

The verb is tripped up, and as I tried to say in the Time with the Children all competitive sports disallow it. Tripping is an infraction. Tripping is an offense. But this was exactly what the Diabolos—Satan, the Devil, or the Adversary was doing to Jesus right after his baptism in the Jordan River.

It's important we see where Jesus is in Luke's story. If you were making your way through the Gospel According to Luke, you would have just read about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. A Voice from above told Jesus he was a "dearly loved Son and a bringer of great joy" to God. Then in Luke, we read of Jesus' ancestry through his mother Mary. After his time in the wilderness he begins his ministry in the village in which he was raised, Nazareth. The temptations in the wilderness are sandwiched between the Baptismal Blessing and Genealogy, and the start of Jesus' public ministry.

An interesting note that Luke makes is that Jesus wasn't tricked into going into the wilderness; he was *led* there, by the Holy Spirit—that is, God. Flip Wilson was a comedian who was a big deal here in the United States in the late 60's and early 70's. His famous line was "the devil made me do it." The devil did not make Jesus (1) go into the wilderness, (2) not eat. It was *God's idea* for Jesus to take a time out after baptism and before Nazareth. The temptations were Satan's idea.

Temptation is a particularly juicy word. We usually think of it as an enticement, even seduction, usually to money, sex or power. But we're reminded by both the dictionary and some of the translators of this passage that a temptation is also a simple test. You and I are being tested all the time—by the DMV, by our teachers (if you're a student), in our health. No one would say the DMV, our teachers or

our health is an enticement or seduction. It's just the way it is if you want a driver's license, or to graduate or to enjoy life. Jesus was both enticed and tested by Satan.

I may have mentioned this before after Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty preached in this pulpit. But we should not spend a great amount of time elaborating the methods or personality of Satan. If you're a Christian believer you believe in the presence and power of evil. The bottom line for believers is "greater is the One who is in you than the One who is in the world." Satan claims to be able to give all the kingdoms of the world to Jesus, and sometimes it appears Satan in fact has that power. But as Reformed Christians we believe that God alone has the final word. God alone is sovereign. So let's not give Satan the dignity of exquisite detail, or unreal power.

Jesus is challenged in three ways. (1) Jesus was challenged to make stones into bread, (2) to bow down to Satan in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world and (3) to jump off the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and be kept from harm by Satan. These three enticements or tests were particular questions, weak spots if you will, in Jesus' armor. Jesus must have been questioned in the wilderness what to do with the blessing he had received at the Jordan River, who was really in charge and how safe would he be when in harm's way. Jesus' tests were catered to his unique call honed in the 30 years he spent in Nazareth and the Voice he heard from heaven at his baptism.

Jesus was tested, as the writer to the Roman Hebrews says, "in all point as we [human beings] are." There's nothing shameful or particularly virtuous about enticements or tests. They're part of life. Scripture and the understanding of it is one tool amidst the tests. We are led into our own wildernesses, and even periods of famine not by Satan but by the very God of Jesus. It's what we do with the tests that makes or breaks us.

You and I must be careful about what we ascribe to God, and just what it means to be human in the world. (I said the same thing last week.) Take illness. Is illness a test? You bet it is! Whether it's mental illness, or borderline mental illness there is nothing wrong with being tested.

We also must remember the obvious: the body is connected to the spirit. It's basic human knowledge that people in content and thriving relationships are much happier and healthier than people in strained or draining relationships. As a seminary professor once told his class as they departed his class after four years with him, "the church is much more into Plato than it is into Jesus." He meant the church largely following the Apostle Paul likes to make a sharp distinction as did Plato between the body and mind. Jesus insisted that the mind follows the body, and vice versa. Mind and body are inextricably connected.

What is the unique temptation, enticement/seduction or test that you are facing on Valentine's Day, President's Day weekend in 2016? I believe our unique test in these days is discouragement - discouragement about our future, discouragement about our church, discouragement about our nation. Sadness is its effect in our person, anger is its effect in the voting booth and in our media. It's experienced as general hopelessness.

I say this with reflection on the events of December 2nd on my mind. (*Pastor Tom is talking about the terrorist attack in San Bernardino*)

James Fallows is what might be called a favorite son of this city of Redlands. James Fallows is also an astute observer of both the national mood and the national condition.

My Lenten fast is from National Public Radio and the New York Times. Before I turned off National Public Radio this past Wednesday Kai Risdall of *Marketplace*, a show that makes business interesting, interviewed James Fallows as he and his wife flew around the country and visited economically depressed communities. They started in San Bernardino and then went to Duluth, Minnesota.

Mr. Fallows said that cities are getting so tired of not getting any help from their counties, states and the national government that they are just doing it themselves. They are talking to businesses, recreating themselves as technology, medical or logistical hubs, or re-inventing themselves, as Duluth has, as a tourist destination.

That's where much of America is. The two party system of government and the relied-upon institutions of public safety, business and commerce are not working, we hear. So, we have to take care of ourselves. People are just fed up. Some are angry, some are scared, and many are hopeless. We need a Savior.

Part of Lent is learning to wait. Part of Lent is learning the power of the word "yet", as in the Psalm "I will yet give thanks to the One who is the help of my countenance and my God [Psalm 42:11]." The wilderness is not a place of ease or delight. There are demons and very little food there. But it is a place we all must go at some time or another. Satan didn't get his way. He misquoted Scripture twice even if he got it right the third time. And yet God, the Holy Spirit gave Jesus the power to fend Satan off even if there was to be another time when Satan would play his games.

And part of Lent is doing something. Make a visit, cultivate a friendship, picking up the phone and having a meal with someone you haven't seen for a while. If we try to think ourselves into a new way of being, we will come up short. It's our action--what we do--which changes our outlook and mood. Please don't just deny yourself into being holy. Find a new practice for the time leading up to Easter.

Tripped Up? As offensive and "illegal as it is", it happens all the time.

But "greater is the One who is in you (and me) than the One who is the world." That One is also in the Pastor Nominating Committee, that One is in the Session, and if you're trusting in the Same, that One is in you, even when you go through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. We are never alone, and never without power as we face our own enticements and tests. "We will yet give thanks to the One who is the help of our countenance, and our God."