

ONE LITTLE WORD SHALL FELL HIM¹

Luke 4: 1-13

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

February 21, 2010

The problem with basing a sermon on the temptation story is that there is hardly a story in the gospels that seems more unreal, or farther removed from our experience, than this one. The devil does not appear to us and transport us from place to place. We are never tempted to turn a stone into a loaf of bread (although I have tasted some bread that reminded me of a stone!). So how can this story make any sense to us today?

I

At the outset, I want to make some general observations about this story and us. The first is that the temptations we experience almost never present themselves in a clear either/or fashion. The choices for us are rarely between good and evil. More often they are between bad and worse, or between good and better. Wouldn't it be nice if our temptations were always clearly between good and evil?

Instead, we have to make choices like whether the needs of the institution outweigh the needs of the individual. Which is better: free speech or public safety? When is a lie justifiable? When can force, even violence, be

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, February 21, 2010.

justifiable? We saw a moral dilemma on the news last week: you are a security guard who has been ordered to be present and observe, but not to interfere. A fight breaks out at your very feet. Do you obey orders and ignore the fight, or do you disobey orders and stop the fight? Very few ethical issues are absolutely clear-cut.

The other observation I want to make about this temptation story has to do with its location in the larger story of Jesus' life and ministry. It comes immediately after one of the most profound religious experiences of his life. His baptism was so profoundly moving to him that he described it as if *the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*² Whatever you make of that experience, it was deeply moving to him! It was a moment of divine illumination that some people spend a lifetime hoping for. He had it at the age of thirty!

What do we expect from a profound religious experience? My guess is that most of us would expect a deep sense of peace to fall upon a person, a sense of tranquility, serenity, calmness. We would expect a sense of harmony with the world, a sense of satisfaction with life and confidence in the future. Instead, the very next event in his life is a story of excruciating temptation, a

² Luke 3: 22.

story of inner struggle and pain, a forty-day marathon of hunger and seduction from one whom the story calls *the devil*. This suggests the real life truth that profound religious experiences often lead to struggle and temptation rather than immediate peace and harmony.

II

With that said, I want to focus in a little closer on these temptations because they may not be as far-fetched as we might think. Satan offers Jesus three things: bread, power, and religion. You can think of it in those terms.

He offers him bread, and God knows he must have been hungry. Maybe he was so weak from hunger out in the wilderness that those stones reminded him of loaves of bread. But I can't help but think of the fact that in our culture "bread" is another term for "cash." We spend most of our lives working for that kind of bread. Satan offers him bread; he says "No."

Then Satan offers him power. He tells Jesus that if he will just pay him appropriate homage, he can have power over all the kingdoms of the world. Satan is like a Washington lobbyist: fall down before my industry and you can have all the power you need! Here we can imagine the inner argument: I have an opportunity to have power, and power is not a bad thing. Think of all the good I can do with power!

Have you ever known anyone who argued that he or she wanted power in order to do bad things? We want power and authority because we imagine that we will do good things with it! After all, when we have bread enough, power is the next thing we want. We want power to live our lives the way we want, to make the choices that we have to make, know how to use power for the good of ourselves and others. Satan offers Jesus all the power he could imagine, and he says, “No.”

Finally, Satan offers Jesus religion—and not just any religion. He offers Jesus spectacular religion, showbiz religion, religion that attracts the masses. And what a temptation that is! There is always a crowd ready to follow a religious leader who is spectacular. Pastoral search committees tend to be attracted to pastors that have shown that they can attract people because every church wants more people. We want religion that works! Throw yourself down and the angels will catch you! We want religion that promises safety and health. In other words, we want religion that has practical, workable results. Satan offers Jesus that kind of religion, and he says, “No.”

III

Just one little word—“No!” Oh, there is a spate of proof-texting. Jesus offers a text for every “no,” but the fact is that one little word is what finally “fells him,” as Luther’s great hymn has it. I have often thought as I have sung

that great Luther hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” that the line about “one little word shall fell him” referred to the word “Jesus.” But now I wonder: maybe it refers to the little word “No.” One little word shall fell him: No!

Does it fascinate you, as it does me, that the very first words that Jesus speaks in his adult ministry are “No...no...no”? We do not first know him as an adult through the things he affirms, or the actions he accomplishes, but rather in what he rejects! I remind you that this is the very first thing he says in his adult ministry in the gospel of Luke. He first words are “No...no...no!”

We are not prone to value negatives. We want to know what a person believes. Don’t base your life on negatives. We want to know what a person does rather than what she refuses to do. But there are times in our lives when we don’t know what we believe in or what we want to do; we just know what we do not believe in and what we will not do! And it is of great value to affirm those negatives! For the rest of the gospel story we get what he affirms, but at the very beginning we only get what he rejects. At some points in our lives that may be the best we can do.

If you look closely at this biblical story you will see that after Jesus says “No” to each of the three temptations, the story says that the devil slinked away. Well, not exactly. It says that the devil *departed from him until an*

*opportune time.*³ There is a little bit of threat in that description. Temptation was not gone for good—just waiting for another chance!

And that is very realistic. Temptation always waits until we are vulnerable, until we are overly confident, until we let our guard down. Temptation is always waiting for an opportune time. We do not tend to personify temptation as the devil (although some may), but we do know that we are all vulnerable at times, and therefore we need each other.

One could wish that, like Jesus, we could always have a biblical proof-text on the tip of our tongues to use when we are tempted. One could wish that we could always have a strong theological or ethical argument for our decisions when we make them. But the truth is that sometimes we make moral decisions without being able to articulate fully our reasons.

Some decisions come by process of elimination. We look at this option and say, “No.” We look at that option and say, “No.” And when it is finally made, the decision sometimes comes because we have said, “No” to other options and not because we can fully articulate the reasons for our “yes” to the chosen option.

³ Luke 4: 13.

IV

There is a story about Martin Luther that says that on entering the city of Worms to be brought on the carpet for his beliefs, he said this: "Though there be as many devils in Worms as there are tiles on the housetops, I must go!" Well, to bring that up to date we could say, "Though there are as many temptations as there are megabites of memory in our computers, I must still be able to say one little word, "No!"