

Temptation and Transformation

by the Rev. Dr. Paul S. Nancarrow

The Devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, and set him up at the very peak of the Temple building, and the Devil said: “If you are the Son of God, jump. If you really are God’s Son, if you really think you are the Chosen, the Beloved, the Special One of God, jump. After all, hasn’t God said he will protect you? Doesn’t it say in Scripture, right there in Psalm 91, that God will send angels to hold you up, so that you won’t even stub your toe against a stone? You believe that, don’t you? You trust God, don’t you? Prove it. Jump. Give God the opportunity to rescue you. If God loves you, surely you can’t be hurt.”

In our Gospel reading today, in Luke’s version of the fasting and temptation of Jesus, this temptation, to test God by jumping from the Temple, is the final, the ultimate, the most insidious temptation of all. As Luke portrays it, everything leads up to this: turning stone into bread, becoming King of the world, pale in comparison to this temptation: the temptation for Jesus to use God’s power to protect himself from harm. The most insidious thing of all is to trust in God, and to believe that trust will protect Jesus from ever having to feel pain, to believe that trust will protect Jesus from ever having to encounter suffering, to believe that trust will protect Jesus from ever having to die.

As Luke sees it, what makes this temptation so insidious is not that the Devil tries to get Jesus to trust God—trusting in God is, after all, a good thing to do—what makes it so insidious is the way the Devil tries to pervert that trust, the way the Devil tries to get Jesus to trust God *for the wrong thing*. You see, it is part of Luke’s idea of the meaning of Jesus that Jesus must *suffer*. All through his Gospel, Luke presents Jesus as a prophet, and over and over again Luke makes it clear that it is part of the vocation of prophet that the prophet must suffer. That’s not because there is anything particularly good or noble or holy about suffering in itself. One of the things anti-religious people say about religious people is that they encourage people to suffer, that religion is inherently masochistic, which leads to it often being sadistic as well. So it’s important to point out that the reason the prophet must suffer is not that there is anything particularly valuable about suffering as such. The reason the prophet must suffer is because the *people* suffer; the reason the prophet must suffer is because suffering is part of the reality of a world estranged from God—and prophets above all else are in touch with reality. Jesus as a prophet must suffer because he feels how the people are lost and anxious and without help and without hope. Jesus must suffer because he brings the people God’s word—and many of the people are afraid of God’s word, they are afraid of the hard work they must do to live into God’s word, they are afraid of the risk it will take to trust in God’s word—and because they are afraid of God’s word, they are afraid of Jesus who brings them God’s word, and because they are afraid of Jesus they lash out at him, and because of that lashing out, Jesus suffers. It is part of Jesus’ work as Messiah that he must suffer, that he must take the people’s suffering and fear and alienation into himself, and through his own trust in God he must transform that suffering into something new. That’s what Jesus’ Passion and Crucifixion are all about: Jesus takes pain and rejection and humiliation and suffering and death into himself, and because he gives himself totally in trust in God’s love, through him that pain and death are transformed into Resurrection and New Life. Jesus must suffer, because he has come to transform suffering, and the only way to transform suffering is to engage it, to take it into himself, and in himself, by God’s grace, to make it into something new.

And that is the process the Devil is trying to subvert. In this temptation, the Devil is trying to get Jesus to back away from the suffering, to refuse the suffering, to ask God to rescue him from the suffering and fix it so that he need never feel the pain. But if he does not feel the pain, he cannot transform the pain. And if he does not transform the pain, then he cannot open up the way for us to follow in embracing and transforming our pain as well. And if the Devil can pull that off, he knows he’ll subvert the entire work of God’s salvation.

And in that sense, this most insidious temptation the Devil sets before Jesus is a temptation we all encounter also. For us too, there is a temptation to avoid pain, to refuse suffering, to try to fix it so that we never need to feel bad, to believe that God's love means we will be unruffledly and unflappably happy all the time. For us too, there is a temptation to believe that God is some sort of Magician in the Sky who will reach down and fix it so that we will never ever have to feel the pain.

But the problem with that is that if we will not feel the pain, then we can never transform the pain. If we will not feel the pain of those who are hungry or homeless or marginalized, we will never be motivated or energized to do something to change the conditions that cause such pain. If we will not feel the pain of those who are going through illness or grief or loss, we can never stand with them in their pain and let them know they are not alone. If we are not willing to admit to ourselves when we're in pain, if we will not name the sorrow or loss or grief we feel, if we try to paper over those soft spots in our souls and pretend there's nothing wrong, if we try to anesthetize ourselves with alcohol or drugs or overwork or addictive attachments—if we will not engage the pain then we can never grow through the pain, we can never witness God's grace transform that pain into resources for wisdom and compassion and love and greater life.

Years ago I saw a movie called *The Doctor*; it was about a surgeon who was brilliant in his technique, but whose personality left a lot to be desired. He was the kind of doctor you would really want in the operating room but never want at your bedside. Well this doctor got a cough, and the cough wouldn't go away, and he went to his own physician and was diagnosed with throat cancer. The doctor became a patient, and he began to realize what a painful thing being a patient can be. He found out what it was like to be afraid for his health, to be afraid for his life, and have none of the medical staff have a kind word or a bit of compassion for him. He found out what it was like to have doctors and technicians talk about his case right in front of him, as if we weren't even there, and how demeaning and hurtful that could be. He found out how important it was to have a human touch in the practice of medicine, and how his own practice of medicine had lacked that human touch for a very long time. The doctor experienced the pain of being a patient, and he took that pain into himself—he didn't run away from it, or make excuses for it, or pretend it didn't matter—he took it into himself, and by feeling it deeply he transformed it into a resource for greater compassion and understanding and love in the way he treated patients from that time on. He transformed that pain into a resource that made him not just a better *doctor*, but a better *healer*.

And that is what Jesus does for all of us in his Passion and Crucifixion and Death and Resurrection. Jesus takes the pain of being human into himself and through God's love he transforms that pain into the way of deeper and greater and more abundant life. And Jesus calls us to do the same. Jesus calls us to resist the temptation to run away from pain, but instead to embrace the reality of his deep compassion, and in that reality to become witnesses and instruments of God's transforming grace.

That is the Good News for us on this First Sunday in Lent. May that Good News sustain us all through our season of penitence and fasting and wrestling with our temptations—and may that Good News empower us to move joyfully toward Christ's Easter life. Amen.