

Lent 1 Luke 4:1-13 21/02/10

Harry Houdini (1874-1926) was an expert at sleight of hand, a skeptic when it came to the spiritualists and other psychic phonies of his day, but he was best known for his ability to escape from what seemed to be impossible situations. Straitjackets, chains, ropes, jail cells, strange devices such as a milk pail filled with water — he managed to escape from one situation after another in full view of his audience.

What did him in, however, was the blow he never saw coming. While reclining on a couch backstage after a performance he was asked by a couple of college students if he could withstand a punch to the stomach. When he answered that he could, one of the students surprised him by actually punching him several times. These blows caught him off guard, and seem to have ruptured an already aggravated appendix. Houdini died a week later. The blow you never see coming is the one that can be the most dangerous.

The temptation of Jesus might have been the blow he never saw coming. In a way it doesn't seem fair. Jesus had shown he could be obedient even when it didn't suit his wishes. He seems to have been surprised, for instance, when at the age of twelve his family had been so worried about the fact he'd stayed behind to discuss the scriptures with the priests in the temple rather than follow them home after Passover. But follow them home he did.

The obedience of Jesus is also seen in his baptism. The humility he shows in descending into the water is rewarded with a pronouncement from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22).

He answered the call of the heavenly Father. He made the right choice. When we make the right choices, do the right things for the right reasons, most of us feel that the world owes us a reward, or at least to cut us a little slack.

But in response to his obedience Jesus was led into the desert by the Holy Spirit to fast for forty days, and after this he was tempted. Couldn't the temptation come at a time when he was stronger? Shouldn't Jesus get a break? The fact is that there is never a perfect time for us to face the temptations of this world. We're never ready. In this time of Lent let us make no mistake: We will be tested — and it will never be the right time. We will be tempted to do things according to the way of the world, for a good cause, and it will be easy to ignore the means so we can achieve what we imagine are the goals of God. Here is the cross, long before the cross. We see the cross in the temptation of Jesus and in our own temptation. The first Sunday in Lent reminds us of how vulnerable we can become to sin, how tempting it can be to cut corners and choose the easy road, and why the best landmark in the wilderness is a cross.

For Jesus the greatest temptation was power — to become the thing he was meant to be — the ruler of the world. He is, after all, the Son of God, but what does it mean to be the Son of God? Was it the aim of his ministry to put himself first, to help himself, to elevate himself, to preserve himself?

After forty days of hunger Jesus was about to learn one thing. It is possible to

resist temptation. And he would need that knowledge later in the Garden of Gethsemane. Resisting temptation teaches us to endure.

In some ways the first temptation seems harmless. Jesus is famished. Why not turn a few stones into bread? It's not like he's going to do it every day. After all, some may wonder, didn't he multiply the loaves and fishes? What was so wrong about turning one lousy stone into a loaf of bread?

The difference, I think, is that in turning loaves and fishes to more loaves and fishes Jesus was quickening what was a natural process in order to feed others. The future kingdom of God, in which all will be filled, was demonstrated through this miracle. Moreover, Jesus performed this miracle for others, because he had compassion on the people.

Knowing the Scriptures is very important. It means that people can't misquote it to you. Some may recall how, some decades ago, a group of well-meaning pop singers came together to sing "We Are The World," for "Live Aid" to raise money for children. One of the lines always galled me — "As God has shown us," they sang, "by turning stones to bread." Ah, that's not what Jesus did. Someone had failed to check a Bible.

In contrast to the natural process of loaves and fishes begetting more of the same, turning a stone into bread is a magic trick. And it would have meant Jesus had performed magic, if you will, to benefit himself and not to put others first.

The second temptation was the offer of a shortcut. It was through the cross that Jesus came to his throne — and Satan shows him an easy way. He would be recognized as the ruler of all the kingdoms — *if* he will bow to the lord of darkness. This is the temptation to all dictators. Think of the abuses of the Soviet governments during the late and unlamented Cold War. They proclaimed a vision of a worker's paradise, where everyone would receive according to their need, and everyone would work according to their ability. But in order to establish such a glorious worldly vision it proved necessary to institute the gulags, to murder millions in prison camps, to rule by terror and deceit.

Nor is this all ancient history — what is to be said about the current state of fear that drives some to think that it is okay to torture and destroy civil rights in order to preserve civil rights? What claim have we to being called a people of faith if we act faithlessly? In response to Satan, Jesus echoes two passages from Deuteronomy: *The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.* — Deuteronomy 6:13

*You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear.* — Deuteronomy 10:20

We serve only God. That means we abide by God's commandments.

In the final temptation, Satan seems to acknowledge the special protection that the Father has given to the Son. Jesus has only to cast himself off the pinnacle of the temple, because, as scripture points out, God will send angels to bear him up and not allow him to be harmed.

Satan quoting scripture. Well, what he said was in the Bible. Psalm 91:11: “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.”

It seems obvious but it bears saying, and then repeating — just because someone quotes scripture doesn’t mean they’re telling the truth. The false prophets of this world, the ones who try to tempt us with the easy way, or place untold burdens upon us can quote scripture as well as anyone.

Jesus responds with a scripture passage — “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’ ” (Deuteronomy 6:16). Note that the devil did not depart permanently, only “until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13).

When it comes to temptation, our own temptation, the trouble is that we see most clearly the things that tempt others — we deny most vociferously the things that tempt us. Other peoples’ sins are more attractive as a target. Can we name and claim what tempts us?

Maybe the temptations that attract Jesus, or others, have no lure for us. Well and good. But that should not make us feel smug. For each of us there is something, perhaps different than others we know, but something, that calls to us. Is it vanity, pride, self-righteousness? How are we to resist?

First, recognize that we are most vulnerable when, like Jesus, we are stretched to our limits. Exhausted, hungry, weak, beaten down by deadlines, stressed out by the demands that pull us in every direction — if we cannot keep our lives in order, if we do not put Christ on the throne in the centre of our lives, if we neglect the rest that God has given us in the sabbath, we are asking for trouble.

Even the King of kings and Lord of lords had to face temptation when he was famished and exhausted. Why should we think we’ll get a free pass?

Second, if you know what you are tempted by, flee those situations. If you’re a diabetic you can’t be tempted by the cheesecake in your freezer if there is no cheesecake in your freezer. If you struggle with a gambling addiction then don’t go to stores that sell lottery tickets. If you feel the need to criticise and knock others- have along hard look at yourself first.

Have we been hit with Satan’s best shot? Do we know if we can resist? We should not go out and seek temptation, but it never hurts to rehearse — what’s the worst that can happen — and what would be our best response? Think it through in advance. Make a plan.

Harry Houdini, after he had been hit by the college student, insisted at the time that if he’d known the punch was coming he would have strengthened his abdominal muscles and received the blow without damage. You know a blow is coming. You know that only rarely are our temptations presented as obviously evil. More often we’re tempted to imagine we might do good if we take a moral shortcut. Don’t kid yourself. If Jesus wasn’t exempt, none of us will ride free. But as we learn from the temptation of Jesus, it won’t last forever, and if you stand upon the rock of your salvation, you have a much better chance of weathering the storm. Amen.