

Lent I Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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If you could turn stones into bread, would you? If you could fly like a bird, would you? If you were offered all the money in the world, would you take it?

The story of Jesus' temptation is the story of power unexercised. It is hard for us to understand, because we live so much in a day when "just because I can" is justification for any action at all. I have always found it helpful to consider Jesus' temptations in terms of power, because here, as in the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane, this is a most helpful way to understand what's really going on. The way of love is not the way of power, at least of worldly power.

Jesus has just been declared and affirmed in his Baptism as God's beloved child. And here, at the outset of his ministry, there is this testing. What does it mean to be God's Son, to live in his love? How do you demonstrate and live out that relationship?

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Now the three temptations of Jesus, God's only and beloved Son, belong to us, too, who have been baptized and are God's beloved children. These are the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Jesus is tempted, as are we, to avoid the cross; to avoid the humiliation, suffering, selflessness, sacrifice and obedience of the cross; and to try and find some short cut to glory.

The first thing we need to realize in this account is that Jesus suffers and is tempted with us. The two greatest accounts of our Lord's temptation come at the beginning and end of his ministry, here and in the Garden of Gethsemane. In this account, the emphasis is on Jesus' victory, and the means of that victory which is the word of God, the sword of the Spirit. In Gethsemane, we have a picture rather of the reality of the temptations Jesus faced and of his struggle with them. So the first point of our Lord's being tempted is this: Because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Jesus knew well that

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while spirit may be willing, the flesh is weak. Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer. He knows the real, hard and painful struggles we all have with temptations. He knows how hard it is to be good, to choose and do what is right. He sympathizes, from and in his own experience, with your weakness.

So whatever your addiction, your besetting sin, your repeated error, your fatal flaw, your great weakness - Jesus Christ has sympathy for you. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. But he tells us that, not to excuse our backslidings, or to pretend that our sins are not so grievous, but rather that he might show us where we may find strength, and grace to help in time of need.

For Jesus not only suffers temptation with us, but for us. And his victory in the wilderness and in Gethsemane may be ours. In the first place, it is by the word of God that he conquers and it is in the second place by prayer. By these means of grace, the Bible and Prayer, we may share in Christ's victory over temptation. We may find that power, which we know lacking in

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ourselves, to live truly as God's beloved children. We need grace to help in time of need, and the two ways by which we may avail ourselves of that grace are Scripture and prayer.

To review, here are the two points we have covered thus far. 1. Jesus was tempted with us, and therefore he can sympathize with our struggles. 2. Jesus was tempted for us, to win against the devil and his seductions, and to show us the path to victory by the grace of God. We follow him in that victory, especially by Scripture and Prayer. And this leads to my third point: Jesus' temptations show us that it is all really about our relationship with God. The devil, as in the beginning, sows the seeds of doubt as to our relationship with God, whether we are really his beloved children. And Jesus faced this first and for all.

Whether you're struggling this Lent with having given up chocolate, or whether you're tempted in your life to lie or commit adultery, it is all really about your relationship with your Father. The devil lies to us about the Christian life, life as a child of God. He makes it out to be a life of banquets and grand displays, about kingdom and power and glory for us, here and now. Jesus' three temptations have to do with Food, Fame and

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Fortune. They have to do with the cares, and riches, and pleasures of this life. The devil would have Jesus, and us, focus only on these. But in every instance, the Scripture Jesus quotes recalls his relationship with his Father. For him to chose to make bread out of stones, would be like Esau selling his birthright for a bowl of soup. And for Christians, all sin is like that - forfeiting our relationship with God our Father, for some bowl of soup or another. Jesus is tempted to chose stuff over his Father, to chose the creation over the Creator. He will eat, and he will provide miraculous bread, but to feed others, he will show himself the Son of God. Not by a flashy display of power, but by suffering love. He will take the kingdom and the power and the glory. Not by compromise with evil, but by overcoming evil with good. He will not choose these things over his relationship with God as his beloved Son. So in every answer, by every Scripture, Jesus recalls his relationship with God his Father. He depends upon and trusts him, so he does not change stones to bread, because he will not test his Father's love. He does not throw himself off the temple peak, because he worships and serves God his Father, so he does not worship another, the devil.

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All our temptations and all our sins must be regarded in this light, in the light of what they mean to our relationship with God - how we are and live as his beloved children, and as brothers and sisters to one another. It is about our relationship with God, for that alone will make us happy, to live as God's beloved children, and as brothers and sisters to each other. No amount of stuff - of food, fame or fortune - will satisfy our hearts and souls. We are all of us weak sinners, but we are by God's grace, through the blood of Christ and the gift of the Spirit, poured out for us and on us, God's beloved, forgiven children. Let us then seek his grace to help us to live, to choose, and to love as such.