

**1 Lent – Year C – February 24, 2010**  
**Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

In the television sci-fi series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the crew of the starship Enterprise faces many dangers in their explorations of the universe. Perhaps none more threatening than an alien entity called the Borg that assimilates all other beings and their technologies into the so-called collective. When faced with any kind of opposition the classic line of the Borg is, “Resistance is futile.”

We might be tempted ourselves into thinking that the only thing that Luke’s Gospel reading is about is temptation. In most of our Bibles, there is little sub-heading that says something like, “The temptations of Jesus,” as if this passage can be summed up so simply. If we stop at the common thematic summary, we will miss some crucial elements of our own spiritual development. And if we challenge that summary, then we also have to ask ourselves where does that leave us? Even Martin Luther says that his “temptations have been my masters in divinity.” We will begin with the testing, but we must also work backwards and forwards to glean the fullest meaning for our own lives of faith.

The first thing we notice is that God’s son, Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit. Just like you and I Jesus has been baptized, and anointed by the Holy Spirit. Right after His baptism, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, where after extensive prayer and fasting He is joined by the devil. Jesus’ wilderness experience is therefore within God’s control and authority. God has delegated some power over the earthly realm to the devil. The first hearers and readers of Luke would have considered Rome to be the controlling political power on earth. The devil considers it his domain. As Walter Wink would remind us, all political entities have a choice to use power according to God’s will and purposes or not. There are no neutral decisions, and no neutral consequences. Rome’s violent and oppressive abuse of power defined her as an ally of the devil, and led to her demise. In Jesus’ testing, we are reminded that all humanity must also make the same choices. Will we be obedient to God’s will or not? Will we be faithful to God or not? Will we use our power within the context of God’s love, for God’s purposes, or misuse power for our own ends? Are we willing to resist evil, in order to experience true release in Christ from the bondage of sin and death? Each choice presumes a knowledge and understanding of the devil’s ways, God’s ways, and the capacity to make the right choice, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

“Give us this day our daily bread,” we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, with the expectation that God will provide. Jesus is famished. He has been fasting for a long period and his body was surely screaming for food. As the Son of God, turning a stone into a loaf of bread to satisfy his hunger would be easy. However, alleviating His hunger is only a superficial issue compared to the significance of what the devil is really inviting Jesus to do. That is a diabolic invitation for Jesus to use His power for an entirely selfish gain, outside of God’s will. Or simply put, to set aside His faith and trust in God’s provision. Where the Israelites failed in this and all the trials of their own wilderness experience, Jesus resists. Maybe the message for us, and especially during this season of Lent, is to consider our own hunger, and how we satisfy that need. Few if any of us, know what it means to feel physical hunger, which is perhaps why the spiritual discipline of fasting is encouraged during Lent. Fasting increases our spiritual endurance and understanding of our utter and total dependence on God alone. Yet what about other forms of hunger? The wants and desires that go beyond our basic needs. The “I want” yearning that exceeds the boundaries that God has set for each of us at a particular time in our lives, for our own good, and God’s purposes. Or the taunting voice of the devil that assails us when we are in our own kind of wilderness: be it a time of testing in our relationships, one associated with our social or economic status, or our hunger for success as defined by worldly standards. Just as it did for Jesus, when we resist the devil’s invitation to use our power for selfish ends, we grow stronger in our trust, faith and dependence on God’s provision.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” You and I are very much accustomed to being the rulers of the kingdoms that are our own lives. In the parlance of modern

psychology, there are very few of us who do not have “control issues”. Yet Scripture makes it abundantly clear that there is only one God, one sovereign Lord of all, and it isn’t me, you, or anyone else, including the devil. God’s purpose has always been to grant Jesus Christ lordship over the everlasting kingdom of God. On the other hand, the kingdoms of the world are temporal, even now passing away, as God’s kingdom is established. What a poor exchange the devil offers Jesus, to acquire immediate access to power over a shoddy facsimile of the glorious kingdom that is already promised to Him as God’s Son. As before, the deeper issue here goes beyond real estate. Accepting earthly political power delegated by the devil denies God’s way of love. Jesus’ destiny is not to fulfill some worldly concept of a conquering Messiah who comes with great power, and sweeps away all the competition. Jesus’ life is given over to establishing a new way of understanding the power of God’s love to conquer sin and death, through a ministry of service to God and neighbor, suffering, and death. Jesus’ way is our own invitation to resist building kingdoms outside of God’s will or purpose for our lives. During Lent, we have the opportunity to examine where we have failed, like the Israelites, to worship only God. All the times when we have neglected to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. Where we have struggled to offer our gifts for ministry in order to build up God’s kingdom, and where we have resisted suffering to save ourselves, and thereby forgotten Whom we serve.

In the third test, the devil changes his strategy to try and match Jesus’ use of Scripture. For Luke, the Temple in Jerusalem is the locus of God’s presence and a refuge from all danger. As the Son of God, Jesus is the head of the new temple of the Spirit, which is found in the Body of Christ throughout the world. The devil fails in his use of the Psalm, because the devil has rejected the Word of God. Trying to operate outside of a relationship with God leaves the devil lacking in discernment and understanding of God’s word. What the devil fails to see in his invitation for Jesus to test God and question God’s faithfulness, is that God’s purpose of divine rescue, the gift of salvation for the whole world, comes *through* Jesus’ suffering and death. To us, Jesus says that to gain our lives, we must lose them for His sake, because God is faithful, and in God’s steadfast love and grace, all those who do will gain the gift of eternal life. None of us will escape death, but through a life of faithful obedience to God in Christ Jesus, the experience of death becomes an open door to eternal life. This is our hope for the future. Our hope rests in God’s gift of grace through our faith in Christ, which is a victory already secured in Jesus’ glorious resurrection. The devil has no such hope, but knows that he is already defeated. Nonetheless, we will all face tests of our faith, because the devil is a sore loser and will try to cheat as many people as possible out of eternal life before his final condemnation. Our faithful resistance strengthens us in times of trial. As someone once wrote, “Temptations that find us dwelling in God are to our faith like winds that more firmly root the tree.”

Jesus resists the devil because He trusts the future to God’s hands. He finds the strength to do so because His life is a witness to the virtue of faithful obedience to God. The habits of holiness are formed in Him through prayer, fasting, studying the word of God, and self-examination. These are all ways that we learn to respond to the devils testing, and ways to grow in Godly integrity. For you and me, it is important to remember that Jesus is not just some impossible model of holiness, faithfulness or obedience. Just as He was not left alone in the wilderness, Jesus has sent the Advocate to help each of us to prepare for mission and to be prepared to resist the Adversary. The Holy Spirit is God’s agent of change dwelling in each of us that transforms us into Christ-likeness. At least one challenge of this first week of Lent is to define our own internal and external barriers that distance us from God, when we should be seeking ways to resist the wiles of the devil. Finally, in what we have shared, and through our own cosmic adventures, let’s be clear that resistance to the devil is never futile. The light of God’s love informs and transforms us. The good news continues in that our obedience to God’s will blesses us with the strength and courage to depend on God alone, to worship and serve only God, and to stand firm in our faith and trust in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.