

No Shortcuts to Glory

A sermon based on Luke 4:1-13

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You may find it hard to believe, given my sophisticated manner and cosmopolitan tastes, that I lived on a dirt-poor farm for the first nine years of my life. We managed, however, to keep some livestock, and I often watched as the cows, once you got them pointed in the direction of the barn, went there eagerly, their eagerness increasing as they got closer to the barn, until at the end they would run through the barn door two and three at a time, without any thought to the damage this hurried entrance did to themselves or the barn! Their homing instinct proved more powerful than their sense of decorum, their good breeding notwithstanding!

I heard of one cow, weighing 700 pounds and about to give birth to a calf, who was sold to a farmer who lived 35 miles away. The cow was transported to the other farm, but, unhappy with her new environment she broke free and returned home! Like a cow, she took the shortest route possible. She broke out of her stall, broke through two barbed wire fences, crossed a river and several highways in a heavy rain, all in a determined effort to get home. Her shortcut exacted a price, however, for she arrived home twenty hours later, covered with scratches, and a hundred pounds lighter.

Our farm was only a quarter-mile from the schoolhouse, but even so, we took a shortcut to the school through the woods. Today I would find the walk pleasant, if you can call a stroll through Saskatchewan scrub bush pleasant, but as a seven-year-old I felt differently. The thought of taking that path often reduced me to anxiety-ridden questions of my mother. I found it much less troubling when my teenage brother and sister accompanied me. Sometimes in winter I would take an even shorter shortcut across the field, but while it looked much shorter and I always had my home in view, it took much longer, for the snow was soft and if I didn't fall through each snowbank, I at least had to climb each one.

Yearning for Home

We may go through doors more gracefully than cattle, but we share with them a yearning for home, and for some of us the yearning, while more complex, is quite tangible and no less intense. For one thing, we have to work much harder at creating a sense of community than the generations before us, for our modern transiency mitigates against a sense of community and rooted-ness. A sense of home has become elusive, and not only in terms of geography but in the more profound sense of values and convictions. One of the more lasting contributions our church can make, and has made, I believe, is to provide a spiritual home and an extended family to those of us living here in exile!

Our yearnings for home, on whatever level we experience them, are intimations of a deeper yearning, a yearning to be at home, spiritually — a yearning to be in communion with God; a yearning to experience the full breadth of God's peace and love and justice, on earth, in much the same manner as we are expecting it to be in heaven. It's a

yearning for that heavenly city whose builder and maker is God. (Hebrews 11:10) Saint Augustine referred to this yearning when he said something to the effect that our heart is restless until it finds its rest in God.

Home is the assurance that there is an order of justice and stability transcending our political, social and economic schemes. It is an intimation of paradise, of paradise lost, perhaps, but also with the hope that it can be regained.

It is for this reason that Jesus came into the world, but he too had to struggle to find his way home. Jesus expressed his yearning when he prayed, "So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed." (John 17:5) The biblical word, "glory," is one of those words that's difficult to explain. It has to do with the splendour of God and the perfection of God, and the indescribable presence of God such as was evident on the Mount of Transfiguration, yet is almost impossible to behold. It is a poetic way, I think, of conveying the presence of God, and Jesus, like us, wanted to experience full communion with God. The testimony of the New Testament, of course, is that he did. Saint Paul, summarizing the Gospel of Jesus, wrote:

"He was revealed in flesh,
vindicated in spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among Gentiles,
believed in throughout the world,
taken up in glory." (1 Timothy 3:16)

Such a succinct summary of Jesus' earthly pilgrimage could lead one to believe that the trip from Nazareth to glory was a fast and easy one! Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Three Shortcuts to Glory

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus, still wet from his baptism in the Jordan, "was led by the Spirit in(to) the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished," says Luke. (Luke 4:1-2) Now, forty days of hunger, alone, in bleak surroundings, is not a shortcut to glory!

After these forty days, Jesus' period of inner wrestling came to a climax when the Tempter said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." (4:3) Then again, "If you...will worship me, (the kingdoms of the world), (their glory and...authority), will all be yours." (4:5-7, rearranged) Each time Jesus countered the temptation with Scripture, but the third time the Tempter had a proof-text of his own, saying, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from (the pinnacle of the temple), for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" (4:9-11)

Why do we call these temptations? They seem harmless. Jesus is not being urged to do something evil. The Tempter is just offering Jesus some marketing advice: "Look, Jesus. You're just starting out. Do something dramatic! Get people's attention. Show people your power. Once you've got their attention, you can use it to accomplish a lot of good!"

The good that Jesus could have accomplished with the first temptation — turning stones into bread — is certainly compatible with other things that he did. On one occasion he fed five thousand hungry people. With the "stony" bread, he could do even more! It would be like MCC on turbo-charge!

The second temptation also holds some real possibilities. The question would no longer be, "What would Jesus do?" but "What is Jesus going to do?" Because Jesus would have the power to do it! You want wealth and resources shared more equitably? Done! You want peace? Jesus, with the power to do it, could make it happen. Now.

The third temptation — the giant leap — seems a little showy, but sometimes you need a hook to get your idea on the public agenda. And had Jesus taken the jump, he would have had lot more than twelve disciples, I can tell you that, and fewer fishermen among them, too!

Jesus' wilderness temptations represented ways for him to accomplish good things, but they were easy ways to accomplish them. Jesus was being offered some shortcuts. "Do it this way, and you can cut out all that preaching to crazy people on crowded hillsides. Do it this way, and you don't have to personally touch so many sick bodies. Do it this way, and you waste less time trying to teach followers that are barely teachable! And best of all, you may not have to go through Calvary."

Malcolm Muggeridge, reflecting on Jesus' temptations, wrote, "Jesus (had) but to give a nod of agreement and he could have constructed Christendom, not on four shaky Gospels and a defeated man nailed on a Cross, but on a basis of sound socio-economic planning and principles... Every utopia could have been brought to pass, every hope have been realized and every dream been made to come true. What a benefactor...Jesus would have been. Acclaimed, equally, in the London School of Economics and the Harvard Business School...."

In fact, in Dostoevsky's "Brothers Karamazov," the Grand Inquisitor chides Jesus for not taking these shortcuts, telling him that it took centuries to undo the damage he did and to get back to the programme the Tempter suggested in the wilderness!

The price, however, was too high. Like the German legend of Faust teaches us, a deal with the devil comes at a very steep price. Jesus was tempted to take the easy road to glory, but, while all three temptations would bring him glory, they would not take him to glory. The road to glory took Jesus through a wilderness, through opposition, through misunderstanding and denial and betrayal, and finally, through suffering and death!

Don't Go There!

We've all found ourselves in the middle of conversations when our intuition suddenly warns us that the next line we might utter will take us someplace we don't want to go! Likewise we may chide someone who bludgeons his or her way into uncomfortable topics with the warning, "Don't go there." One morning, a pastor announced to his congregation that the bishop had just appointed him to another church. After the worship service, a woman came up to him and expressed her dismay. He said to her, "Oh, I'm sure the bishop will send you someone who's a far better preacher and pastor than I am."

"No," the woman replied, "that won't happen and that can't happen." The pastor's instincts should have told him to leave it alone. "Don't go there." But, being a sucker for

praise and adulation, he asked, "Why not?" To which she replied, "Because I've been here for five pastors now, and each one was worse than the last."

Faced with temptations, we need an early warning system that cautions us, "Don't go there," because the temptations which face us are often ambiguous, and we can't see where they would do much harm.

** Surely it couldn't hurt to skip out of work, just this once.

** It couldn't hurt to fudge the numbers, just this once.

** What that person doesn't know won't hurt him or her, and so just this one time I'll keep some of the information back.

** I believe in open communication in marriage, but that doesn't mean I have to tell my spouse everything, does it?

** Yes, I realize it's a shortcut to discipline my kids in this fashion, but I'm in a hurry, and I need the peace and quiet now. Just this once.

** I know it's wrong to cheat, but everyone does it, and it's not fair to be penalized for being honest.

If Jesus' temptations hold a lesson for us, it is to increase our awareness of temptations. It's important to keep our spiritual intuition fine-tuned, so that we recognize temptations for what they are — shortcuts! And we need keen consciences to warn us, "Don't go there!"

No Shortcuts to Easter, Or to Glory

Our path to Easter leads through Lent, and while we may not take the traditional Lenten disciplines very seriously, they are there for a reason — to fine-tune our spiritual instincts. And if there are no shortcuts to glory, there are also no shortcuts to Easter!

Barbara Brown Taylor, whom I mentioned last week, shares a rather dour view of Christianity when she says that when the initial rush of Christian adrenaline was over, believers got very ho-hum about their faith, and they stopped expecting much from God or from themselves. They settled back into comfortable routines, remembering their once passionate devotion to God the way they remembered the other enthusiasms of their youth. And little by little, "...Christians became devoted to their comforts instead: the soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things made them feel safe and cared for — if not by God, then by themselves. They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy...." ("Settling for Less," *Christian Century*, February 18, 1998, page 169)

Lent dares us to be holy — to think of Jesus, if only for a season, not as some kind of Divine psychiatrist or Divine detergent, but as someone who challenges us to greater holiness. Lent is a time, not to detour around the desert but to walk right through it,

grappling with our demons, and with the sacred wisdom that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Lent is a time to grapple with who we are, and with whose we are, and to emerge from it more robust in spirit. "And after you have suffered for a little while," promise the Scriptures, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will ... restore, support, strengthen, and establish you." (1 Peter 5:10) AMEN

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.