

The scripture lesson today is taken from the Gospel of Luke, the fourth chapter beginning at the first verse. It is known as the temptation of Jesus:

"After his baptism, Jesus full of the Holy Spirit returned from Jordan and He was led by the spirit Into 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. The devil said to him "If you are the Son of God command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him "It is written one does not live by bread alone." Then the Devil led him up and showed him in an instant, all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to Him "To you I will give the glory and all their glory and all this Authority for it has been given over to me and I give it to anyone I please. If you then will worship me, it will be yours." And Jesus answered him "It is written Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him. Then the devil took him to Jerusalem and placed Him on the Pinnacle of the temple saying to Him "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here 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." Jesus answered him "It is said do not put the Lord your God to the test. "And the devil had finished every test. He departed from him until an opportune time."

Here ends the reading of the gospel of St. Luke. The story of the temptation of Jesus is one of my favorites. And one of the reasons is that in so many times when I'm reading the gospel I think to myself "well that's Jesus. I can't pattern myself like that.

He doesn't know what my life is like, Jesus is God working it out in the flesh. But here, Jesus is going through a very human experience, that is temptation. And when Jesus goes through an experience there's a lesson in it for us. Now, Jesus was in the desert it's said for 40 days and so on the Christian calendar last Wednesday, which would be Ash Wednesday, marks 40 days till Easter. And that's where the 40 days comes from for lent is this time of preparation that Jesus was in the desert and it's our time to prepare ourselves for Easter, the resurrection, so those were the connections. So it's a perfect text for us to start on the first Sunday of Lent. Now in that story, just to reiterate, Jesus is tempted in three major ways. First he says "you're hungry take these stones and make it bread"; the second he says "come up look at all these kingdoms. You could have them all if you do what I say right? And the third is prove yourself to me. Throw yourself down and not be heard; so three temptations. Can we relate to these? Do these have anything to do with us and our lives? I think so. On the first one I think these are almost three of the typical, common temptations that all of us have. And the first one what do we often refer to money as in our lives; Bread. Give me some dough, give me some bread; So even that image has translated. How many times have we in on our own lives, we've heard of the people say- "What are you doing that job for? Why are you engaging in that thing? And they go "Hey. I got to pay the rent" or "I've got a mortgage to pay." I've heard more really bad acts justified in the name of [00:04:13]. She's like "Yeah I'd like to be moral about it but I've got expenses and if I don't pay my expenses. So bread, food, that's our major temptation, that we have a belief, that if we follow this path and we get paid well, we can sort of maybe give it to charity or do something good on the other side of it, even if the activity itself is immoral. An immoral

business, or immoral activity, it's not good. We know it's not good. No one has to tell us it's not good-we already know all that but we justify it and that is often the first tempt, very, very common temptation.

The second one more or less is about power and couldn't be more at home in all cities than this city. I was recently watching, I am as you know a political junkie so I was watching commercials for CNN for a series they're doing on the presidency and the line is "What would you do to become the most powerful person in the world, the presidency." And I thought "Wow. That phrase could have literally just came out of the Demonic presence there," because it really does say I'm involved with many people in politics and very often I'll say " whoa, you're doing this, you don't believe it's a good idea so how do you justify it and they'll say "look here's the deal we got to do that because for me to be in power then I can do good. It's a lot like the mortgage thing right? "I got to pay the mortgage." This is "if I get elected if I'm in power, I can do good, whatever means it takes for me to get there, if I have to step on people, crush people, destroy people's reputations, that's for the greater good. So it's another Temptation. Ends justify the means, exactly Helen and the evil and its temptation forms rarely comes directly at us. It always comes a little around the back. And then the third area was where he says "prove yourself." Now how often in our lives do we hear that voice when we want to know do we have the right clothes, the right apartment, the right car, the right neighbor, the right Church, the right status, we're always being asked to prove ourselves. "Prove yourself;" Satan in the story says to Jesus "Prove yourself." We're always trying to prove ourselves. Our whole advertising industry in some ways is built on the idea of "you're not good

enough, but if you use this toothpaste, you're going to get a date, it's that simple;" "If you did this you'll be rich." these are very, very tempting in our consumer culture. So even though Jesus face these many years ago, those archetypical temptations are with us today. Jesus faced them, we face them. The question then is why? Why are we tempted ? In our theology we would say that temptation is the natural state of being a human being. There's not a human being who's not been tempted to do evil and in fact spiritual growth takes place when we overcome temptation, when we face evil and we move beyond it . Those who never have temptation, for example little children, we understand from our teachings that they travel right to Heaven because they've never had a choice of good or evil. But they also miss the chance to overcome temptation or darkness or evil. So you could think of it in the in the expression that the gyms use "no pain, no gain." I also noticed that astronauts who fly around the earth for long periods of time have no gravitational pull or push on them. Their bones become very brittle, because our bones need the push of gravity to operate. We live and move because of the tensions that we live in. And so if temptation is a natural part of life how do we respond to it? Are there evil spirits?

So last week I talked about the Transfiguration and I talked about Jesus seeking counsel from spiritual guardians, and I believe in that. This could almost be the flip side of that. And I do believe in evil spirits. Maybe one of the more controversial things I've talked about or preached about, so you can give me some feedback if you think I'm way off, I do know that the topic of evil spirits or evil energy, demonic, any of that is probably one of the more unsophisticated things you could talk about in secular society. So I've talked to people and they'll say "You don't believe that, you

don't believe in evil spirits do you? Like ha, ha medieval enough and when I say "yes" they go "Wow, that's really, really medieval of you, it's really backward, it's really unsophisticated that you would believe that there is evil out there. I do believe there is evil. I believe spirits are allowed to tempt us. I believe that's why Jesus is doing this teaching. It's my personal belief that a lot of what we would call mental illness has aspects of demonic presence in it in people and there's some incredible writing on this topic where therapists have actually said "who is that" and it's almost another voice comes through and it's a different voice with a different goal. so this is a controversial field I'm on, so again, in the feedback, you can tell me if you think I'm crazy but mental illness may be an aspect of it. Another example-this last week something very horrible was in the news if you saw it; in Virginia, Nicole Lovell was a Seventh grader. A seventh grader who had overcome an operation to have her, I think cancer. She had been mocked in school and being bullied and somebody, a couple of Virginia Tech students propositioned her online and said hey we want to meet you and, this guy "I think you're really cute." And she sneaks out of the window with her cartoon blanket and she's ritually murdered and they had it all planned including getting rid of the body. So why did I bring in such a horrible topic on a beautiful Valentine Sunday, because we will say well, "Well there's mental health issues, what happened to those kids what it is- I actually believe there is evil working in the world. I don't know how we can explain things like that in any other way it's so horrific, it's so terrible.

Now this is interesting, in my own life, a story that just recently happened, a little run-in with evil if you will. So when I took the church job I moved in an apartment

nearby that was a mission, before that it was a car dealership and I thought it would be cool to be at a place that had a mission church, you know, always looking for these correspondences. And one of the first nights that I was there, I was woken up from my sleep, with a nightmare which I almost never have and it was just a demonic presence; I mean it was just an evil and I felt it in the room. And I thought "This is very strange. I prayed, said Psalms, you know and it went away. This is what's really weird about it-the next day I meet with the priest that wanted to meet with me. Now this priest was a venture capital real estate guy in his life until he was 60 so he was a multi multi-millionaire with eight homes, found his life empty, became a brother in the Catholic Church, took a vow of poverty and lived almost as a homeless person in DC and was telling me the story and he's living there in a brothers Community right now. And he was telling me his whole story, it was fascinating. And then he said "What about you, and so in my part of the conversation I share about living at the mission. And he said "My gosh, when I was homeless, I lived there." And he said "I hope you're not on the third floor." Now I know this sounds like a horror movie but it really happened. And I said "I am on the third floor." And he said "We had a murder and various horrible things take place on that floor where you are." And he said "Definitely, do a smudge, do prayers, you're in a space that will react to your energy. So think what you will, these sort of stories happen to me all the time. I've been countering evil so I think it's very real. I think it's the world we live in. So I thought, for this sermon, what would be practical, what could we use and I thought "How can we better identify these voices? How can we identify evil and be aware of it?" In my experience I have now coached hundreds of people and done counseling and some spiritual counseling, I found that those voices

always focus on the past. They always bring up the past it's always negative, very negative and it says "Look at you miss. [00:13:25] sounds like 'Look around'. Look what you did wrong;" very negative voices. Second thing I found is they bring in shame. Angelic voices would never bring in shame, they always say you're too this, you're too that, look at you fail, look how you're not good at this; and so those voices. And that's another thing so when you hear a voice in your head, we all have voices in our head, when we hear the voices talking about the past and dwelling on the past and wanting you to go back into the past, when you hear voices that are dwelling on shame and saying "You should be completely ashamed of yourself," and saying "Go back in time."

The third, I found is they're very judgmental. God is not judgmental and the angels are not judgmental so when you here shame on you shame, and it's a lot of judgment, and there have also been times in my life where, I don't know if you've had this experience, where I've had a voice say something about somebody else I'm looking at and I say "Where did I come from, that was so horrible," and I'm ashamed that I even thought it. I'm glad nobody can hear it. Those are coming from the hellish realms and we should be aware of it. And finally, the other element that I found is that they are hopeless, there is no way out of this. They kind of paint things [00:14:41] and they say "Things are hopeless." When we give in to that energy, when we go with it, it can bring us into a darker and darker space. So I say those to be very aware of it.

Now at the very last line of the story of Jesus the demonic presence says "he decides, he'll come back at a more opportune time. These things are very patient; these forces. They will circle back at a right opportunity. So, is there anything that we can do when we're fighting them? Well, one I think, in this story of Jesus and whenever Jesus is dealing with demonic possession, it is okay to call them out, even if you need to say "Get behind me Satan," if you need to say "You're a liar," whatever phrase you need to say, but it's okay to engage them and just say "You're not telling the truth. The other thing is an exercise that I found very helpful with myself and clients. It's more of a therapeutic exercise, by Byron Katie and she calls it 'The Work' and she says "When you have a thought in your head and you feel really stuck, you can do these questions," and it really does work, you say "Is this true?" So let me just give an example "I am never going to succeed at this job, this is never going to work; my pastor hear at this church "It's never going to work, it's a negative voice. The first thing you say "Is it true?" And then ask yourself the second question "Is it absolutely true?" Most people will say "Yes it's true." Is it absolutely true? "Well yes." Is there any chance that it's not true? Any chance? Most people will say "Well, there's a chance." And if it wasn't true, how would you feel then? And it somehow flips the energy we say "Oh, there's a way out. There is another way of looking at this. Sometimes, I think when we're facing temptation of evil we can get very locked in and very myopic and we put blinders on and have you ever tried to get help to somebody in that situation where they say "This is this" And you give advice and they say "No. Not that. That's not going to work. We've done it ourselves, almost want to be there trapped in the drama, beware of that. That's a good exercise and you can look that up or I can share it with you if you're interested in more.

Another thing that I found in these situations, Jesus uses it in the text today, is memorizing the word and memorizing scripture. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy when He's responding. These are all quotes from the scripture that he's giving back. But I have found that the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, these are the things that we have in every service, the Sanctus, which is the holy, holy Lord God of power and might, if you come from the Catholic tradition and people use the rosary, holy water, whatever it is I find these are actually very powerful weapons. So again, when you're in those situations and you feel that darkness, praying the Lord's Prayer, doing the 23rd Psalm, those things are very powerful.

Third, remain calm. Jesus in the story is very calm. My experience in these situations is that the energy that you're dealing with is an angry, upset energy, it wants to take you to that level. If you get pulled into it, it's hard to get out. Remain calm and realize it's not you. Detach yourself from it and then fourth I would say, again based on my experience, traveling in the spiritual world playing games like a Ouija board or just doing séances with friends and things like that for fun or games can be quite dangerous and Swedenborg actually speaks about that. You're opening portals to things and you really don't know where you're going and they're out there and so it's generally, it may not be your grandmother coming through on the line, it could be somebody else impersonating. So just be very careful with that. And I think even with children, I am adamant when I'm talking to kids that they should not play those games. Sounds silly, it's a Hasbro game, what could be so dangerous about it? We're tapping into voices that are very powerful and we shouldn't be naive about it. I also say this because some people have told me this again and again and again and I

don't know particularly why, it has no biblical background but smudge sticks. These are like big sage sticks, have you ever seen the,? So people will use those, they're always used for like home blessings, cleansings, so maybe it's more from the new age culture, and maybe some of you have had some experience with it, but it is so commonly referred to that it is something to consider if you feel like a presence or you're trying to change an energy.

CONGREGANT: The Sufi tradition of purification

Exactly, The Sufi, [00:19:31] so it is definitely. And I would say that when you study the people who work on [00:19:38], always start with that. And then finally I would say, research it. There's a great book by William Van Dusen called 'The presence of spirits in madness' that I think is fascinating and it's his study as a therapist engaging with spirits and saying "who's there? What's going on?" And another resource is, if you haven't discovered this site yet called 'Off the left eye,' Curtis Childs for the Swedenborg Foundation does a video series where he answers questions and he is just quite brilliant and he does a great job. He's done three or four on this topic and it's interesting, the callers you can tell have no background in [00:20:20] and asking really like "I am trapped. This is going on." Those voices you described are exactly the voices I'm hearing so if you're looking for more research; I think researching and being prepared. So thank you for coming with me today on a journey into evil. I think we've looked at the fact that Jesus was tempted. As human beings we have been and will continue to be tempted and some argue that the more pure you are spiritually, the greater the Temptations that will come; so the

mountain gets larger as you continue and you need more spiritual ammunition. I hope that through this discussion we can be more aware and recognize it when we see it and also we have some practical things that we can actually do to fight off evil because it is real and the faster we can deal with those forces that come into our lives and push them away and get them behind us, the faster that we can grow and develop our spiritual life closer to God. Amen.