

February 21, 2010  
 Lent 1 C      Luke 4:1-13  
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### IS THE SALMON FRESH?

Let us pray:  
 Grant us, O God, to hear your voice;  
 and in hearing your voice to love your Word;  
 and in loving your Word, to do your will;  
 through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

It's been many years now since Bill Watterson stopped drawing his Calvin and Hobbes comic strips, but the adventures of that little boy and his stuffed (but very real to him) tiger were a favorite in our house when Karen and Greg were little.

My favorite Calvin and Hobbs cartoon was one in which the young boy and his tiger lie tucked into bed in their darkened bedroom. Suddenly, from under the bed, comes the voice of a monster, saying "Hey kid! There's a big shiny toy for you under here. Come get it!"

Not fooled for a second by the monster, Calvin responds, "Oh sure! You just want me to come down there so you can grab me with some oozing appendage, slowly paralyze me with some vile secretion and devour me alive! Nice try!" he says. "Forget it!"

And then, after settling back under the covers, Calvin mutters to Hobbes, "Stupid monsters. All fangs and no brains!" But then the voice from under the bed returns, only this time turning its focus on Hobbes, saying, "Hey Tiger! We'll give you some salmon if you push the kid over the bed!" To which Hobbes responds: "Is the salmon fresh?"

Temptation. This morning, the Sundays of Lent begin as they always do, with the story of Jesus in the wilderness, being tempted by the devil. Fresh from the waters of his Baptism at the Jordan River, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where, Luke tells us, after fasting for forty days, the Devil dangles shiny toys before his face and tells him how tasty and fresh the salmon is.

"Hey Jesus!" The devil begins. "I bet you're hungry. How about a stone picnic, just me and you? Who's to know? What'll it hurt? Turn this stone into a loaf of bread."

Next, it's "Worship me, Jesus, and you can rule the world." Then "Jump off the temple and force God to make you an airbag of angels to cushion the fall. If you are the Son of God, why not act like it? If you've got almighty power, flaunt it!"

But Jesus is more like Calvin than Hobbes. He sees right through the devil's trap and not only resists the temptation but three times refutes the appeal of what's offered him. "Nice try!" Jesus says, "But forget it! One does not live by bread alone. One ought not put God to the test. God alone is worthy of trust and worship."

The key to resisting temptation, as Jesus and Calvin both seem to know, is seeing through the tantalizing offer, whatever it may be, and recognizing the monster behind it, understanding that temptation needs to be resisted at its core - at its source, because once we, like Hobbes, begin asking how fresh the salmon is, we're already in that monster's grip.

It's no coincidence that the gospels place Jesus' time of trial in the wilderness right after the account of his baptism at the Jordan River. The central issue of those forty days was, after all, Jesus' identity. What did it mean to be "The Son of God" as that baptismal voice from heaven declared. That was the question repeatedly and bluntly posed by the devil. "IF you are the Son of God, Jesus, why don't you use that identity and power to feed your own hungers, establish your own dominion, or build your own adoring following?"

They were questions that left Jesus with two very basic options, a Calvin or Hobbes kind of decision to make. He could tell the devil to simply get lost, or he could ask "Whole wheat or rye?" "How much authority?" or "How many angels?" More than "Will he do it or won't he?" the question of this text is the more basic one of "Will Jesus listen to God, or listen to the devil?"

He of course chose to heed the voice of his baptism. No matter how appealing the offers might have been, the credibility and reliability of the offerER was all that mattered. "Nice try!" Jesus said. "Forget it!"

Temptation. We all know what it's like. We've all heard the sweet invitations of its alluring voice. And we too have the same two basic options for responding to it. We can make our ethical decisions in life the way Hobbes evidently did, based on a pure cost/benefit analysis, or by looking behind the offer to its origin, and asking if it's a voice that our baptism into Christ allows us to heed at all.

In many ways we've all been trained, when a desire, urge or temptation comes our way, to weigh the options, count the costs, to ask "How good is this possibility, really? How fresh is the salmon? What are my chances of getting caught? What's the price to my self esteem, my family, my reputation, my health, my future if I do this?"

Questions like that can actually be quite useful and effective in keeping us in line. The monster under the car seat says "If you run this red light, you can get where you're going thirty-five seconds sooner!" But when we ask how fresh that piece of salmon is, we begin to think about the police car that might be watching that intersection or more likely about the possibility that we might kill ourselves or someone else, and in that split second of decision making, our foot goes on the brake and we stop. Temptation loses.

Weighing the freshness of the salmon does work to keep us ethical and clean and safe mostly, but only (and here's it's ultimate failing) only until the salmon gets really fresh and tasty. Because if our ethical decisions are based solely on weighing cost and benefit, at some point the scales will tip to the tempter's side. The salmon will simply be too fresh to resist.

But there is another way to resist temptation, and that is to know both who you are and who the tempter is. The key to resisting temptation, and defeating temptation is not in evaluating the offer itself but in evaluating its source, remembering to whom you belong, and deciding at a very basic level who you're going to trust with your life, especially when the going gets tough.

Calvin never asked how shiny the toy was and Jesus never asked what kind of bread or the devil was proposing that he bake because they both immediately say "I KNOW WHO YOU ARE, (and in Jesus' case "I know who I AM!") and for that reason alone, I'm not going to listen to you!" If our only reason for NOT yielding to temptation is that doing so will cost us more than its worth, there is no spiritual core to our ethics at all. Sooner or later the salmon simply gets too fresh to resist.

The answer to temptation for us, therefore, is right where it was for Jesus: in our Baptism, settled before any specific appealing temptation comes our way. Temptation is at its core a question of identity. "WHO AM I? AND WHOSE VOICE WILL I HEED?" If I am a child of God in Christ Jesus, as my baptism tells me, does this behavior, this choice, this option fit that identity or not? Does it please God? Does it serve my neighbor? Whose voice am I really hearing and heeding?"

Which is what makes this gathering, this hour, this meal, and this season of Lent so important. Like the ancient Israelite in today's first reading, who came to the temple with his harvest offering and recited the history of God's goodness to his ancestors and to him as the core source and motivation of that gift, and like the early Christians in Rome who were urged by Paul to both believe in their hearts and confess on their lips the saving work of God in their lives, we gather to hear God's voice spoken in God's Word, to confess with our lips the faith into which we were baptized, and to taste God's goodness in Holy Communion - all so that we can stay grounded in that identity and recognize those gifts in all of life, and also so that we can grow in our ability to distinguish God's voice from the voice of the devilish monsters that continue to call to us from under our beds.

For us, as for Jesus, knowing who we are and whose we are is the only answer to temptation that will get us through the wilderness of this world. And because we're NOT Jesus, it's also the only way to pick up the pieces and move on when temptation wins a victory.

"Hey kid! There's a big shiny toy for you under the bed. Come get it!" "Oh sure! You just want me to come down there so you can grab me with some oozing appendage, slowly paralyze me with some vile secretion and devour me alive! Nice try! Forget it!"

"Hey Jesus! These stones would make a tasty lunch. These kingdoms could all be yours. These crowds would love an angel show. Come and get it!"

"Begone Satan! The only thing you want is the trust and worship and obedience that belongs only to God. Nice try! Forget it!"

May the disciplines of Lent fill our hearts with believing and open our lips to confessing that same wisdom, so that we'll have our answer for the tempter, and have it no matter how fresh the salmon is.

AMEN