

Luke 4:1-13, Anthon UMC, March 10. 19, "Goodness Is Stronger than Evil..."
By Sheryl K Ashley

Goodness is stronger than evil. Good people live and give up their lives to promote goodness but no matter how strong they are it can be costly, but good people are willing. Goodness is willing to pay the price to defeat evil in the power of Jesus Christ. If the devil could have overcome Jesus in that wilderness testing, he would have done it and evil would have triumphed. But Jesus, when tested endured the costly temptation to give into the demands of evil. He endured the physical need of hunger, gave up earthly glory and turned down taking the easy way of a splashy miracle saving him.

I suppose we've all fought the good fight against temptation, and won or lost the battle, but unless we who have lived fairly protected lives have experienced some fierce battles, we don't realize what others may be going through. I think of those who reside in the Warming Shelter that we helped fund with our offerings the night of Ash Wednesday. Many of them have no idea how to get their lives on a level that will give them shelter or home. Perhaps unjust things in life have happened to them. Perhaps addictions or mental illness rule their lives. Perhaps they have never been taught how to succeed in life.

I read a story that that may be true or not but it emphasizes the fact that some of us who have everyday temptations, have no idea what others live through in their lives, and it comes as a big surprise to us to hear it told first hand. It doesn't seem logical or real to us. It blows our minds to enter their world. Some of us who live in fairly safe worlds ignore there are people who live such opposite lives.

Seems there was a couple of nice church ladies named Helen and Gladys who were going door to door. As members of First Church's evangelism committee, they were

knocking on doors and inviting folks to their church. But being in their 80s they got a bit disoriented and ended up evangelizing what some might term a seedy neighborhood. No one responded to their invitation—except Verleen. Verleen had never been in church in her life, never even picked up a Bible, but was so taken with the Sunday worship, that she decided to attend the Wednesday morning women’s Bible Study.

“Our study today is from Luke 4,” the pastor began. “It’s the story about Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. Have any of you ever been faced with temptation, and with Jesus help resisted?” the pastor asked the group of ladies after sharing this scripture.

One woman told about how just the week before, she had walked out of the grocery store with an extra loaf of bread. “Why should I return it? It was their mistake, not mine,” she argued. But finally, she remembered who she was—a Christian—and so she marched back into the store and paid for the loaf of bread. (I’ve actually done that with a six pack of pop that was missed by the checkout clerk as it was on the bottom shelf of my cart. Do you realize when you return to the store to do that act of honesty as I did, you have to get back to the end of the line again and wait your turn to pay for your item? And really no one is that impressed with your honesty, but maybe God. Anyway, back to the story. The ladies all agreed that this was indeed a very good example of resisting temptation. I mean, what story would you tell about resisting temptation if you were put on the spot?

Then Verleen spoke. “A couple of years ago, I was into cocaine really big. You know what that’s like! You know how that stuff makes you crazy? Well, anyway, my boyfriend, not the one I’ve got now, the one who was the daddy of my first child, that

one, well we're high on coke and so we knock over a gas station one night—got \$200 out of it. It was as simple as taking candy from a baby. Well, my boyfriend, he says to me, 'Let's knock off that convenience store down on the corner.' And something in me, it says, 'No, I've held up that gas station with you, but I ain't going to hold up no convenience store.' He beat the hell out of me, but I still said, "No." It felt good to say "No" 'cause that's the only time in my life I ever said "No" to anything. Made me feel like I was somebody."

Verleen is right. That did make her somebody, somebody capable of making choices to say "No" to temptation even at a high cost. That is exactly what this text is all about today. Saying "No" because we remember who we are. Saying "No" because something is just plain wrong. Saying "No" because the battle belongs to the Lord.

You may not think this is a true story but I have spoken with people whose experiences with temptation come across so much more potent than mine, because of how they were raised and where they have lived. This is a troubled world due to lack of parenting or because of the desperate life lived in poverty or untreated mental illness. The importance of good parenting and early teaching made me think of the news story recently about two little girls in California, Caroline and Leida Carrero, ages 5 and 8. Not waiting for their parents to join them they got lost on a hike in woody area. They were missing for 44 hours facing the cold and the dark of night, but they had been taught to survive because they were of all things, 4-Hers, and had taken survival training. They drank water dripping from Huckleberry leaves, they found shelter under branches, they clung together for warmth and very importantly they didn't leave the spot from where they first discovered they were lost. They were 1.4 miles from their camp site. Now

training your children to survive physically is of great importance, but training them to survive spiritually and morally is also of first concern.

Verleen had made it physically this far in life but she didn't know a healthy way to survive morally as she had not been taught. But the trust she had in these church ladies who accidentally invited her to join them helped her think about temptation and that resisting it and saying "NO" to stealing more was a good thing, even if it cost her a good beating. You could say her life was a total wilderness in many ways.

Jesus was entering His wilderness in our Gospel reading today...a wilderness that would test his resolve to take the beating of his life coming up on the horizon of God's great plan to save humanity. Jesus was truly God, baptized with a tangible blessing from his heavenly Father that shored him up for the onslaught that was to come from the ruler of this world, Satan. Jesus was also truly man and had the blessing of being raised by parents who protected him...parents who panicked when he was 12 and thought him to be lost after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but later found him the temple. Jesus stayed where he was last seen because he knew who he was and he knew where he was suppose to be. So, his parents found him, safe and sound and about His heavenly Father's business, but he was obedient to go home and be under their authority once again.

And now the time had come. The powers of this earth were watching him, watching for an opportunity to take him down before He had a chance to assert his authority over them. We don't know how literal the conversations were that are recorded in our Bible between the devil and Jesus. But whether the devil appeared before Jesus in a red cape, or as a beautiful creature or as a whispered voice in his head, we do know the

temptations to abort this plan of salvation that was put in place before the world began, was about to be taken to the next level. Except for this irritating horse fly named Satan buzzing in his brain, and a few wild dangerous animals, Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness had to be a lonely time. Rocks for a bed, stars for company, no comforts of blankets for warmth, led out there by the Holy Spirit who obviously was the voice in Jesus' head that he chose to listen to and obey. Was it a comforting voice? I trust so, but it certainly was a challenging voice that led him there for his own training, so that when the bigger temptations came, Jesus would know he could overcome evil with good.

But those other voices; the voice of his own hunger after 40 days that urged him to turn stones into bread were loud. Some stones do look like a loaf of bread and to the eyes of a starving man, it could seem to be so. And to the soul of a man who knew he was the essence of God Jesus knew he could make it to be bread, and that terrible pain in his stomach would stop eating him alive. So, when the tempter whispered in his ear, "Do it!" Jesus heard the growl of his stomach and it was a terrific battle to deny his flesh what it craved. It is a terrific battle at time for us to deny our own flesh what we crave. Jesus, trained from childhood in the scripture fell back on it as a powerful support system to get himself through this temptation. Jesus replied to the evil, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Jesus had fasted for 40 days. Could the temptation come at a time when he was stronger? Shouldn't Jesus get a break? The fact is that there is never a perfect time for us to face the temptation of this world.

But when we are in a weakened state the devil rarely fails to give us one more push. The second time it was to see the panoramic view of the beautiful kingdoms of this world and Satan promised them to Jesus, in exchange for just a moment of worship of this evil being, just put me first, and you can have it all. Of course, we would never do that, but we ignore the fact that when we put what glitters and is golden before our desire for God, we have worshiped another god. Jesus again fell back on the scripture that helped him overcome the first temptation. "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him," He replied.

A third time, Satan struck an Achilles heel to almost anyone who knows they rightfully hold a place in God's heart and that they have a calling to perform that which will bring glory to God. Surely God will protect them from harm if they do something out of the ordinary, to publicly prove themselves.

Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and said, "IF you are who you say you are, jump from here. People will be impressed and believe in you and you won't have to go through all that you are contemplating to save this unworthy creation." Some gifted preachers and other persons of fame, test God to protect them from the results of their actions by taking tremendous chances with their lives.

I was reading about Harry Houdini who was an expert in his ability to escape from what seemed to be impossible situations. Straitjackets, chains ropes, jail cells, strange devices such as a milk pail filled with water – he managed to escape from one situation after another in full view of his audience. He could overcome anything in his own power. What did him in was something he never saw coming. While reclining on a couch backstage after a performance he was asked by a couple of college students if he could

withstand a punch to the stomach. When he answered that he could, one of the students surprised him by actually punching him several times. These blows caught him off guard, and seem to have ruptured an already aggravated appendix. Houdini died a week later. Sometimes we are tempted to think we are beyond the reach of danger and we take chances we should not take to show how great we are.

But again Jesus, surely knowing God would indeed save him, chose wisely, not to misuse his power. He chose to proclaim the word and he chose to obey it. At this time Satan even tried using the Word to convince him but Jesus did not waver. Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

And because Jesus was obedient, the devil was out of tests...the devil left Jesus for now. Yes, Satan would return with new and great tests but Jesus would be ready for him. The prize would be our salvation. Why are we worth so much to God? We are his prize creation. Jesus overcame every trial, test, and temptation for us and by his strength enables us to overcome them also. Goodness is greater than evil. When you remember who you are and put yourself in God's care. Victory is yours!