

GETTING PAST TEMPTATION

A sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie on February 21, 2010, the First Sunday in Lent, based on St. Luke 4:1-13.

Luke's version of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness has some interesting details. Each of Satan's lures is prefaced by the word "if": *If* you are the Son of God... command this stone to become a loaf of bread... *If* you will worship me...it will all be yours... *If* you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here..."

Maybe this word "if" is of tremendous importance. *Could it be that "if" ... doubt... second-guessing... diverts us from living the best we know?*

Look at Jesus. In all three of the synoptic Gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke, Jesus presents himself for baptism by John, his cousin. In all three Gospels, Jesus doesn't begin his active ministry until this testing time in the Judean wilderness. As Barbara Bishop, Ruth Sugeno and I saw firsthand, the wilderness is frightening to look at, let alone inhabit.

The wilderness we saw is a desolate place; it's hard to believe *anything* could survive in it very long. Of course, we know that any description using the word "forty" is not to be taken literally. It simply means "a long time." But that doesn't dull the impact of this story. Jesus stayed "a long time" in the wilderness. Near the end of his sojourn there, he was hungry, he was thirsty, he was tired. But more than that, he might have had some doubts.

Jesus had come to the desert "full of the Spirit, Luke says. (Mark's version has the Spirit *driving* Jesus into the wilderness.) All this happens immediately after his baptism, when he hears a voice from heaven, saying, "You are my Son, the beloved; in you I am well pleased."

That affirmation by God would be almost overwhelming; too much to take in. Hence time alone and apart, time in the wilderness; time and space to hear, re-hear and try to assimilate this amazing, unforgettable experience.

"You are my son, my beloved." How about *this*: "You are my daughter, my beloved." Our tradition teaches us that we are *all* daughters and sons of God. That's what our liturgy of Baptism shows us. It's a wonderful prospect and a scary one, too. Because if I am really God's child, God's daughter, I have a lot to live up to. And if I don't, I know I am failing to live the best I know.

This is when what the Bible labels "Satan" comes in. This is when our doubts and our fears come in, telling us, "No, *YOU* can't do that! *YOU'RE* not good enough! *YOU'RE* a disappointment to yourself and others and you'll NEVER be good enough!"

Whenever we hear these voices inside our heads; or not hear, but *feel* them, we know we're that we're in the presence of Satan, the Accuser, the one who tells us, relentlessly, that we're not good enough, we are not worthy, we might as well give up.

Jesus shows us how to resist, how we can fight back. The devil quotes Scripture? Well, Jesus quotes Scripture right back *at* him. The devil insists Jesus bow down to him? *Jesus* insists that he will depend on God, and God alone: the best, the truest, the most *real* force for good he'll ever know.

Like many, I've been following Tiger Woods' fall from grace. It really does read like a Greek tragedy. Was Tiger, like Icarus, flying too near the sun? Did he believe his own publicity? Did he think of himself as a god-like creature who owed no allegiance to anything or anyone outside immediate self-gratification?

Friday Tiger apologized to the world. People disagree whether this was a heartfelt apology or just an elaborately crafted spin. But he *did* say he felt entitled, by his enormous success and celebrity, "to enjoy all the temptations around me." What he claims he knows now is, "I was wrong. I was foolish. I don't get to play by different rules."

What leads any of *us* to yield our souls to temptation? For some, it might be something like Tiger's sense of entitlement. "I've worked hard. I give a lot to everyone who asks anything of me. Why *shouldn't* I have...? well, you fill in the blank.

Tiger was first seen by the general public on Bob Hope's television show when he was five years old, maybe even younger. I've seen the clip. Like a puppet, he performed on demand. And that's what he has been doing ever since, with amazing results. The golfer his father shaped and molded over his entire childhood and youth yielded a mature golfer threatening to surpass Jack Nicklaus' amazing record.

Tiger, ever the obedient child, always did what was expected by his father, which was to position himself to surpass every other living golfer. Once his demanding father died, once he was safely married, with a gorgeous wife and beautiful children, perhaps Tiger felt, "Okay, *now's* the time for *me!*"

The problem was that Tiger's "me" was already wrapped up with several people who depended on him for their security and his presence. It could not any longer be all about him.

I find myself wondering if the issue of *fear* might be behind Tiger's bizarre behavior. With all the pressure I can imagine him saying, "what if I *can't* be the best in the whole world? What if I *don't* surpass Jack Nicklaus' record? Who or what will I be *then*? What can I hope for in the future? Will there be any future for me at all?

Here we are, beginning Lent, this wonderful time of self-reflection. And here we have two examples: Tiger, who caved to self-above-everyone-else urges; and Jesus, who emerges from the desert centered and full of purpose. What makes the difference?

First and always, we need to *remember*. We need to remember *who* we are and *whose* we are. We belong to God in Christ. We as Christians dedicate ourselves to a way beyond satisfying the cravings of the self; that ruthless tyrant who never can be satisfied. Christians know that we will never be personally happy or fulfilled until they we shift our focus from self to others.

Let me say this another way. It is *not* that we should love and serve others because that is the *right* thing to do, or that we'll go to hell if we don't. The amazing thing is that loving and serving others is the best way to care for *ourselves*. Who knew?

Jesus knew. He discovered that in the wilderness. He preached and lived that until his death on the cross. Now, as Resurrection followers of Jesus, it's time for *us* to make his dream our *own*.

Satan, that lying accuser, may try to cast doubts by introducing "ifs" into the self-doubting corners of our lives. As we remember God, who sustains us in all *our* wildernesses; like Jesus, will know better.