

“Looking for the One You’ll Never See Coming” Luke 4:1-13

Harry Houdini was perhaps the most famous magician who ever lived. And his specialty was escaping from all kinds of traps and dangerous devices and situations.

He would be hung upside down and wrapped up in a straitjacket. And he would get out.

He was handcuffed and shackled and locked inside a packing crate that was then dumped into the East River. And he got out.

He was sealed inside a casket and submerged in a swimming pool. And he climbed out unharmed after about 90 minutes.

Houdini always escaped because he was ready for the challenge. He prepared carefully and thoroughly for all his stunts and performances. He trained himself to control his breathing and contort his body. He learned how to conceal keys and lock picks in places no one would ever find them. He knew all the dangers of what he did.

But have you ever heard about how Houdini died? It had nothing to do with any of his shows or tricks.

He was sitting backstage on a couch one afternoon in Montreal. Two college students approached him and asked if it was true that he could withstand a punch to the stomach.

Houdini said that it was true. He could take any blow to the stomach if he could brace himself.

One of the students decided to test him right then and there and punched him hard four times in the stomach. Houdini did not see these blows coming and did not have a chance to brace himself. The punches ruptured his appendix and he died of complications one week later.

Houdini could escape almost any trap known to humankind. But this was one thing he could not escape. One thing for which he found himself unprepared. A danger that he never saw coming.¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Houdini#Death

This can be a lesson for us. The most dangerous situation is one that we never see coming. The most difficult temptation to resist is the one that we never consider to be a temptation. We are seldom prepared for such things because we do not recognize them as potentially deadly snares or traps.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree that Jesus was led out into the desert where he was tempted by Satan or the devil. Yet I wonder if this does not lead us to focus way too much on temptation as coming from outside of us.

Does it lead us to think that temptation comes primarily from our neighbors? Or from a television commercial? Or from the internet?

We can be tempted to believe that temptation comes *only* from outside of us. And so the best thing we can do is to avoid temptation by avoiding the places where temptation dwells or getting rid of those places where sin makes its home.

However, there is an old Jewish tale about how the Evil Spirit once was sad and depressed. And the Evil Spirit came to God and complained. *“Almighty God,”* he wailed, *“I want you to know that I am bored—bored to tears! I go around doing nothing all day long. There is not a bit of work for me to do!”*

And God was surprised. *“I don’t understand you,”* he said, *“There is plenty of work to be done but you’ve got to have more initiative. Why don’t you try to lead people into sin? That IS your job!”*

***“Lead people into sin?!”* exclaimed the Evil Spirit, *“Why Lord, even before I can get a chance to say a word to any man he has already gone ahead and sinned without me.”*²**

The point of the story is that we cannot get away with claiming that the devil makes us do it. Sin is within us. Temptation comes from within. So it is impossible to avoid.

We may pray that God not lead us into temptation, but maybe that is because, in the words of the writer Rita Mae Brown,³ we can find the way into temptation by ourselves.

If we want to deal effectively with temptation, we begin by looking inside. We look at our own hearts. Our own minds. And our own souls. For that is where sin and temptation reside.

The English writer G. K. Chesterton is said to have replied to a London newspaper story that invited readers to address the problem of evil. They were to send in an answer to the question: What is wrong with the world today?

² *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People.*

³ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/lead_me_not_into_temptation-i_can_find_the_way/224565.html

And Chesterton gave them a very brief but profound reply. What is wrong with the world today? “*Dear Sir,*” he wrote, “*I am.*”⁴

We almost never see temptation coming because we are too busy looking for the problem. And in the end, the problem is us.

Another problem is that temptations almost never sound like an invitation to do something bad or evil. Very few of us are tempted to do wrong or hurt someone just for the sheer enjoyment of it.

But temptation, and especially the strongest temptations, are always attractive. Frequently, they sound like good and noble ideas. They entice us to do things that are quite desirable. Even beneficial.

Remember that early Christian art portrayed Satan as a pure and beautiful young man or as a lovely fallen angel. And here in Luke, the devil does not propose anything that is inherently evil. He does not tempt Jesus to kill anyone or rob anyone or get drunk or look at naked women.

He wants Jesus to turn stones into bread. And bread is good.

It is a gift from God. It feeds people. It keeps people alive. And later, Jesus will make bread and feed thousands with just a few loaves and some fish.

He wants Jesus to reign over all the kingdoms of the world. And certainly, that would be good.

If Jesus was in charge, the kingdom of God would come. If Jesus was in charge, justice and righteousness would prevail. And indeed, later, Jesus will tell us that he *has been* given all authority in heaven and on earth.

And he wants Jesus to prove his faith in God by jumping off the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem. The devil even quotes scripture here to make his case. And scripture is good. And proving faith is good.

And later, Jesus will prove his faith in God by commending his spirit to his Father on the cross.

A college professor tells the story of her little four year old son who learned this passage of scripture at Sunday school one week. And he asked her what she knew about the devil. Being a good educator, she asked *him* what *he* knew about the devil.

⁴ <http://www.chesterton.org/wrong-with-world/>

“Well,” he said, “if we were at a store, and you and Dad were in one aisle, and I was in another aisle, and—(he whispered for effect)—there was candy ... the devil would say, ‘You should take some!’”

And his mom, proud of her son for paying such attention to the Sunday school lesson, asked him another question. *“Honey,” she said, “if we were at a store, and Dad and I were in one aisle, and you were in another aisle, and there was candy, and the devil said, ‘You should take some!’ what would you say back to the devil?”*

And the little boy’s face lit up with a grin. *“Oh!” he replied, “I would say thank you!”*⁵

And why not say thank you? It is good manners. And candy is really good especially if you are four years old.

It is not yucky or nasty or awful. It is tasty. It is sweet. It is a delight.

And this is what makes temptation so dangerous. And why we almost never see it coming. The most dangerous temptations always ask us to do something good.

As I said before, there would be nothing inherently wrong with Jesus turning stones into bread and feeding himself. But Jesus’ ministry was not all about feeding himself or taking care of himself. That was not his chief priority.

His ministry was one of feeding others and caring for others. He would use his power and authority to heal and to restore life and health to those who were sick and broken not to gratify his own personal desires.

It is a good word for us to hear. For there is nothing wrong with taking care of ourselves. I want to affirm that. And there is nothing wrong with churches taking care of their own needs.

Yet the voice of the tempter is always there beckoning us to make it our chief priority. To put ourselves first and never consider the needs of others. To forget about everyone else. To forget about the world outside the church walls and focus only on the comfort of those already inside those walls.

That is a great temptation that strikes all of us. And we never see it coming.

As I said before, there would be nothing wrong with Jesus ruling over all the kingdoms of the world. But to do so here, he would need to make a deal with the devil. He would be seeking God’s purpose but in a demonic way. He would be seeking good and holy ends but through devilish and demonic means.

⁵ *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.*

I could not help but think about Lance Armstrong, the champion cyclist who was in the news so much a few years ago.

I would imagine that all of us have gone through our own battles with cancer or have known a loved one or a friend who has gone through a battle with that terrible disease. And perhaps no one has contributed more to cancer research over the last 20 years or so.

His *Livestrong Foundation* (you may have seen the yellow bracelets) has generated half a billion dollars for this cause. And he has become a symbol of hope for cancer patients all around the world by surviving his own battle with cancer and winning many cycling races.

Cancer research is a very, very good thing. Yet about five years ago, we discovered that Armstrong owes his fame and fortune to using performance enhancing drugs and other illegal means to win multiple cycling titles.

And what is worse, he lied about his cheating for a decade. And what is even worse, he viciously attacked anyone who told the truth about his steroid use calling one woman fat and homely and bitter and jealous and accusing another woman, his former physical therapist, of being an alcoholic and a prostitute.

An acquaintance and business associate of Armstrong even left a voice mail for a woman who testified against him in a court case that said *"I hope that somebody breaks a baseball bat over your head."*⁶

He accomplished plenty of good. His success and fame allowed him to raise plenty of money for a good cause.

But by what means? And at what cost?

It is tempting to believe that good ends justify any means.

It is good to provide for our families. But do we do so by spending so much time at work that we never see our spouse or our children?

No doubt that freedom is a good thing. Freedom of speech. Freedom to bear arms. But does this mean that these freedoms are to be protected at all costs?

Church traditions are good things that connect us with our past and transmit our values and beliefs. But do we defend church traditions at all cost even when they have long outlived their usefulness and may even have become a barrier that keeps others from joining the church?

Church growth is a good thing. We want to reach out and draw people to worship with us and join the mission of Christ. But does that mean that we are willing to do whatever it

⁶ <http://sports.yahoo.com/news/questions-oprah-should-ask-lance-armstrong-230849439.html>

takes to get people through the doors even if that means being less than faithful to our understanding of the gospel?

There are no easy answers here. But then again, there would be no temptation if it was easy. We are tempted not by obvious evil but by that which, in and of itself, is good. And so we never see it coming.

As I said before, there is nothing inherently wrong with depending upon God's care and protection. And there is nothing wrong with demonstrating our faith.

But the devil invites Jesus to put God to the test. It is a subtle way of enticing Jesus to manipulate God.

All of us know that when a child says to his parents "*If you love me, you will ...*" he is trying to get something out of them. And when a woman tells her husband or a man tells his wife "*If you love me, you will ...*", one is trying to get something out of the other.

We come up with all sorts of little tests for God trying to get him to do what we want him to do.

If my wife is healed of her cancer, then I will know that God loves me. If my son comes back safely from the war, then I'll know that God is on my side. If I get that job that I've been praying so hard for, then I'll know that God cares about me.

We want God to do these good things for us. And so we never see the temptation coming.

Jesus will not fall into that trap. He refuses to put God to the test. He refuses to try to manipulate God. He will not pressure God to prove his love. He will have trust. He will have faith and calls us to share in that faith and trust.

Like Houdini, I suspect that most of us can escape from temptation when it urges us to do awful and ugly things. We are prepared for the temptations that come from the outside. The obvious threats. The obvious evils.

But this day, in this Season of Lent, we are called to look within. We are called to examine closely even that which we believe to be good. And even that which *is* good. For in those good and noble intentions, in those highly desirable things, the voice of the tempter speaks.

So let us be ready. Let us be alert and aware. And let us keep looking for the temptations that are more subtle. Let us keep looking for the ones we may never see coming and put all of our trust and faith in God so that we do not give in.

May it be so in this season and every season.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.