

Gimme Shelter

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Scriptures: Deuteronomy 26:1–11; Psalm 91; Romans 10:4–13; Luke 4:1–13

The one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."

Perhaps due to an over-enthusiastic view of my own abilities, or perhaps due to ignorance of how the world works, I tried out for my high school football team my freshman year of high school. This is despite having no experience in the sport and being a little slight, shall we say, to have much of a real effect on blocking or tackling any of the other players on the field. It only lasted one football season. But one memory sticks out among the rest from many grueling practices. The first string players were lined up to practice their kickoff, which meant that a bunch of us bench players formed the squad that was returning the kick. But not to worry, I was not positioned in the returner position. There was little chance that I would be touching the ball or get hit on this play. That is of course unless the kick is a short one, which is what happened to be the call that particular practice. And so, as I watched the ball tumbling end over end high above my head, I had the thought that if I were to catch a single football for the rest of my life, this better be that football. It was a high kick and so at the last minute, as the kicking team closed in, I waived my hand in the air

to signal for a fair catch, saying I would not run and so I did not need to be tackled - the right call not only for my physical well-being, but given the closeness of the defense, this was the right football call as well. And I am proud to say that I did indeed catch and hold onto that football, even after the senior linebacker ignored my fair catch signal and laid me out on the field at full speed.

I didn't know I was under attack. I assumed I was not. But it was coming all the same. It can be the attacks that you don't see coming that can bring the most havoc and mayhem.

We are bombarded with the language of attack. Searching the words "under attack" on social media will get you results reflecting everything from geopolitical conflicts, to the lamenting of perceived and real loss of rights and privileges, all the way to the ridiculous. One of the first results that came up for me when I searched the words "under attack" on social media was pictures of the streaks of cloud left by planes in the sky, claiming that this was somehow yet another way that we are "under attack."

One of the strategies of the Evil One is to have us looking in all the wrong directions for things that are out to get us, to keep our heads on such a swivel that we do not recognize his attacks on our souls, minds and bodies, his attacks on our faith and on our integrity. The season of Lent is a good opportunity to stop, tune out the noise, and figure out which attacks we should actually be concerned about.

Because the attacks will come. The Psalmist shares with us a litany of forces that have risen against him, forces that cause him to seek shelter in God's presence.

Beginning in verse 3: snares, pestilence, terror, arrows, pestilence again (don't we know it in a post pandemic world!), destruction, the fall of thousands at your side, even ten thousand next to you. The threat is real.

But as the Apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians chapter six, our struggle is not against flesh and blood. Our true enemy is no fellow image bearer, whom we are called to love even when they are acting as our enemy, no our enemy is "the rulers...the authorities... the cosmic powers over this present darkness... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."¹ Our battle is primarily a spiritual one. We fight in a different manner, not with swords, or horses, or guns, or tanks, but with the things of God. Light is the thing that has the ability to drive out darkness.²

And here at the beginning of Lent, we are right to remember that in times of preparation for holy things that the attack can intensify. Note the placement of Jesus' temptation in Luke's gospel. It immediately precedes the beginning of his public ministry. So it is in the time of preparation for his work, in the time of prayer and fasting, that Satan comes and tempts Jesus. If Jesus could not escape temptation, then we should not expect to either.

We too approach a holy thing at the end of our forty days of fasting. At Easter, we renew our baptismal vows and our renunciation of the world, the flesh, and the Devil. As I like to tell those families and individuals preparing for baptism and making those vows for the first time - the Evil One is not a fan of what is going to go down on that day. So we ought not to be surprised when we encounter temptations and

¹ Gal 6:12

² Paraphrasing MLK here.

frustrations as we approach our recommitment to those promises made at our baptism.

And so here at the beginning of Lent it is good for us to recall the nature of the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness and look to his example of perseverance as we encounter our own temptations. While we do not face the exact temptations Jesus did, they hit at places where we all have been and will be tempted and tested.

So let's turn to our gospel reading for today in Luke 4. "And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."³

Jesus, led by the Spirit into the wilderness after his baptism, has endured forty days of fasting. He's hungry. So what is the problem? Don't all human beings, including our fully divine and fully human Savior, need to eat? Well yes, but the temptation is not so much about the food itself, though in the food we have the appeal of the temptation. The temptation was to not trust God for what he needed and take matters into his own hands.

If your Garden of Eden alarm bells are going off, you are on the right track, because we are seeing here the same temptation that Eve faced in the garden: "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, ... she took of its fruit and ate."⁴ Adam and Eve were not content to let God be the source of their provision. They thought perhaps God was holding out on them and

³ Luke 4:2b-3

⁴ Gen 3: 6

they needed to take control themselves, literally taking hold of what was not theirs through their own power.

Jesus had the ability to get for himself what he wanted. But he persevered through temptation because he was able to wait for God to give him what he needed. In our service of baptism, the candidate or sponsoring adults are asked to respond in the affirmative to the following question: “Do you renounce the sinful desires of the flesh that draw you from the love of God?”⁵ Another way of asking that question is “Are you willing to submit to God’s provision for what you need instead of taking through your own power whatever you want?” The world is wrought with a bunch of human beings taking the things they want when they can. This attack comes from the inside, our very selfish desires, and the damage is great. I am worse off and the world is worse off when I get everything I want when I want it. And so in our baptismal vows we renounce the desires of the flesh.

Jesus’ next temptation maps well with our baptismal renunciation of the world: “Do you renounce the empty promises and deadly deceits of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?”⁶

Luke writes: “And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, ‘To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’”⁷

⁵ BCP 2019, service of baptism (160ff)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Luke 4:5-7

If I was in charge, then everything would be great. If I just had this amount of money, this job, this power, this car, this house, then I would be happy. I think you can see the problem. The lie of the world is that if you just had the next thing, then you'd have enough. But the trick is that there is always a next thing.

Jesus was offered it all. "We can skip the whole rat race," Satan says to Jesus, "I'll just go ahead and give you everything. Wouldn't you do so much good with all of this, Jesus? Oh, and all you have to do to get it is turn from worshipping the one true God, your Father, and worship me." To chase after the lies of the world is to worship those things and the father of the lies that deceives us into chasing them.

Satan's third temptation gets at Jesus' identity. "And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here."⁸

"Are you really who you say you are, Jesus, who you think you are?" That is the question of the third temptation. Having failed to get Jesus to cave with the desires of the flesh or the promises of the world, Satan goes straight to Jesus' own understanding of who he is. The temptation here is two-fold - If Jesus jumps and is rescued by angels, not only would he answer any lingering questions of self-doubt, but it would be a clear sign to everyone present in a busy Temple courtyard that he was indeed the Messiah. If Satan were an even better salesman, he might have called it a shortcut to the Kingdom. "No cross necessary. Let's just put on a show for the people. They'll be lining up to hear you preach in no time."

⁸ Luke 4:9

But Jesus remains steadfast because he knows who he is. Luke's recording of Jesus' genealogy comes immediately before this account of the three temptations, making it clear to us readers that Jesus is without a doubt the Son of God. He needs no parlor tricks in the Temple to prove that to anyone.

So often our temptations attack us where we are unsure of ourselves or unsure of God's posture towards us. But our identity is just as secure as Jesus' was. In baptism, we are named as God's beloved daughters and sons. If we are rooted in that truth, we can resist temptation from a place of security and trust, knowing we don't have to prove anything to the one who would see us fall.

Since Lent is a time where we prepare ourselves to renew those holy vows made at our baptism, we should expect the temptations of our own desires, the temptations of the world's lies, and the temptations that make us feel that we are anything other than God's beloved children. Look out for these temptations! Sometimes just naming them for what they are can be a powerful tool in resisting them.

But how do we respond when Satan uses our flesh, the lies of the world, or our own doubts about God's love for us in his attempt to get us to sin? Well, we fight back! But this isn't the Braveheart-style revenge vendetta sort of fighting we're talking about. Listen again to the words of the Psalmist about the solution to his many adversaries and dangers:

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High

will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."

Our best offense is a divine defense. We fight by sheltering, taking refuge under the cover of God. This is not some act of cowardice, but in fact is the most brave thing we can do, to survey all of our weaknesses, insecurities, and broken desires, and be honest - we can't do it alone. We can't resist the attacks and temptations of the Enemy by ourselves.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

My help comes from the Lord,

who made heaven and earth"⁹

We take shelter in the Lord. And our Lenten disciplines help us to do just that. In our fasting from things that we want, we remind ourselves that our wants are not the final say and that it is God who provides us with what we truly need. In our giving to those in need, we deprogram ourselves from the lies of the world that say the more we have, the more full lives we lead and instead we pursue the fullness that comes from a life lived in the pursuit of the things of God. And when we lean into the reading of Scripture and prayer, we reject the Devil's lies about who we are and are reminded of what God says about us.

⁹ Psalm 121:1-2

And when we fail, as we all do, we confess, we repent. Confession and repentance, paths of healing, are ways that we take shelter in the great mercies of God.

The bad news is that we are vulnerable to temptation. The good news is that the man who is God met the Tempter in the wilderness and sent him packing. And so that when we take shelter in him we will arrive in safety.

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