

Luke 4:1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3 The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” 4 Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

Luke 4:5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” 8 Jesus answered him, “It is written,
‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

Luke 4:9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written,
‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

11 and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

12 Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

MY ROAD TO THE WILDERNESS

When I graduated from seminary, it was one of the happiest days of my life. For four long years I had worked to receive my degree, and this day was the climax of it all.

When the Dean placed the hood over my head, representing the completion of the Doctor of Ministry degree, he said, “Enjoy it Frank. This is what the hard work has been all about.”

And I did enjoy it. I was the center of attention that day. My parents were there. My wife’s parents were there. Everyone took us out to eat and told us how proud they were of my accomplishments. It seemed that God had blessed me in a special way. I felt very, very confident.

But, the feeling didn’t last very long!

Almost immediately friends began packing up to leave for new jobs as pastors and associate pastors throughout the South. I didn’t realize I would miss them so much. The seminary campus began to feel deserted, and I began to fret about what was to come.

Our families also returned home, and Carrollyn and I waited for the arrival of some folks from a small community in East Tennessee. We really didn't know them that well. We had only visited the community twice. But, they helped us stuff our belongings into a U-Haul truck, and headed out into the unknown.

We finally got everything moved in without any major problems. The interim pastor preached that first Sunday so I had a chance to unpack and rest up from all the moving.

And then came that first week on the job. The study seemed so quiet. As I tried to prepare that first sermon, my mind was a total blank. (If there's anything worse than writer's block, it's preacher's block. The writer can put off publishing a book. The preacher has to preach each week ... ready or not!)

And as I began to mull over all that had happened to me those past few weeks I began to have doubts. No longer was I a student minister with limited responsibilities. I was the pastor responsible for the care of a congregation.

It was very frightening. I hadn't even been on the job for a whole week, and I already wanted to quit!

I later learned that such doubts are quite common for a new pastor, and they are also common for anyone who is undergoing a big life change. I suspect some of you have had similar experiences. Maybe you too had trouble adjusting to a new job, the birth of a child, or the death of loved one. Whatever the change that causes us distress it's amazing how quickly we can go from victory to defeat, from faith to doubt.

THE WILDERNESS

I wonder if the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness doesn't describe similar doubts and fears. You may remember that in all three synoptic gospels the story of Jesus' temptation is preceded by the story of Jesus' baptism.

Jesus' baptism was a high point. It marked the beginning of his career as the embodiment of the gospel. Through his baptism Jesus identified with the world that he came to save, and God affirmed this special work of Jesus.

The Scripture says that "the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

Can imagine the heavens being ripped open and the very presence of God affirming you in this way? You would think that an affirmation like this would have given Jesus the confidence to go and proclaim the gospel right away. He was the chosen one. He was the Messiah.

But, it didn't happen that way.

Mark's gospel puts it in the most striking way. Jesus is baptized. The heavens are ripped open. The Spirit descends upon him like a dove. The heavenly voice proclaims that he is the Son of God. And "immediately" (Mark's favorite word) Jesus is driven into the desert where he was tempted for 40 days by Satan.

Perhaps one of the biggest misconceptions about the Christian life is that once we decide to do God's will ... once we've received his baptism ... that life will go smoothly for us.

But, often that just isn't the case. Sometimes (almost "immediately" it seems) we find ourselves in the wilderness ... a wilderness where we are alone with our problems ... a wilderness where the wolves are at the door ... a wilderness where the only person who seems to be winning is the devil.

And so it was with Jesus. He found himself alone in the desert where he was tempted by the devil.

Some of this might sound a bit strange to our modern ears ...visions, temptations, the appearance of the devil. It surely doesn't sound like anything we have experienced.

But, don't be fooled. Temptation and the power of evil present a challenge to every human being. Our wilderness may look different and our devil may try a slightly different approach when it comes to temptation. (I like that old song that says the devil has blue eyes and blue jeans!)

But, rest assured that our story is the same.

In fact the Bible tells us that the struggle of temptation defines the humanity of Christ. In Hebrews 4:15 we read, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who was tempted in every way, just as we are--yet without sin."

So, it is right to ask, "What does the temptation of Jesus teach us about our temptations? Where do they come from? And how can these temptations be overcome?"

THE TEMPTATION OF HUNGER

Temptation begins with our hunger. The Bible tells us that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness without food. He was more than hungry. He was famished.

And notice that it is at precisely this moment of weakness that the devil came to tempt Jesus. So it is with us. When our physical and spiritual resources are at their lowest, when we are hungry in some way, then we are tempted.

The temptation of the devil is quite subtle and reasonable. He says, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

The voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism had already declared him to be the Son of God.

But, the voice of the tempter suggests that he should doubt that voice. The big word when it comes to temptation is that little word, if. Suppose it's not true? Suppose we can't trust God for our daily bread?

In a world filled hunger and loneliness, bread can be a great temptation. The temptation of turning stones into bread is more than just the temptation to feed our immediate hunger. The temptation is about trusting in the physical more than we trust in the spiritual.

You can see this in the answer that Jesus gives to this temptation. Quoting Scripture (which he does in response to each of these temptations) Jesus said, "... man does not live by bread alone ..." (Deuteronomy 8:3) And the rest of that verse goes "but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

In context, this passage records the words of Moses. He was speaking to God's people during the time of the Exodus. Moses said that God "humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known to teach you that man does not live by bread alone ..."

The hunger of the wilderness can teach us to trust God. The devil suggests that if Jesus turns stones into bread that it will prove he is the Son of God. Actually, it would prove just the opposite.

God's children don't trust in some magical power that can take away all our hungers. God's love is not proved or disproved by bread on the table, cars in the garage and a fat bank account.

God's love is the bread of life. God's love is a word of comfort and hope that is with us in good times and in bad. Especially in our times of hunger we humbly learn to trust the salvation of God instead of trusting in ourselves.

Jesus would later tell his disciples, "Do not worry about you life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes." Jesus rejected the temptation to frantically seek after material things as a source of ultimate salvation and so should we.

Jesus did not see his hunger in the wilderness as a punishment or a reason for despair. Jesus saw the wilderness as an opportunity to wait upon the Lord, to trust in his heavenly Father for his basic needs.

When we are hungry in the wilderness how do we respond to the challenge? Do we see it as an opportunity to trust the provision of God?

It's only when the well runs dry that we miss the water. It's only when we're hungry that we desire food. It's only when we're left alone in a hostile world that we remember our need for the presence of God.

Looking back on my life I can see that the times of hunger in the wilderness were also the times that I learned the most about what it means to have faith.

THE TEMPTATION OF POWER

And so the devil failed in his first temptation so he tried another. He led Jesus to a high mountain and in an instant showed him all the kingdoms of the world.

In the Bible Satan is often referred to as the ruler of this world or even more strongly the "god of this world" who has "blinded the minds of unbelievers." (2 Corinthians 4:4) Of course we don't need to read this in the Bible. We can read it in the newspaper or watch it on the nightly news. But, suffice it to say that this was a real temptation. It was the temptation of power.

In a world that is dangerous and corrupt there is a temptation to fight fire with fire. We've often said that the people of Jesus' day thought that the Messiah would be a political and military leader. And there were Scripture passages that seemed to support that idea.

The devil said, "Lead the revolution. Give the people what they want. Just do it my way instead of God's ways, and the victory will be yours." But, of course as the devil admits in his pitch, to do that would mean that he would have to worship the devil.

You would think that worshipping the devil would not be a very effective temptation, especially for the Son of God. But, the promise of easy victory and the idea that the ends justify the means is always a great temptation.

The history of God's people and the history of the world proves that this is true.

In the Old Testament the people were forever trusting in foreign alliances and corrupt kings instead of the protection of God. But, it didn't work.

Their attempts to secure their own future through military and political means always made them less safe. The disasters that befell God's people in the Old Testament were always the result of trusting political and military power instead of God's power.

Over and over again the people suffered defeat because of their lack of faith, but they would not learn the lesson. They still desired a military solution. They still worshipped power and might, and they wanted a Messiah who would lead them in that direction.

And the Bible tells us, in doing that, they were worshipping the devil. They were falling down at the feet of the devil in an attempt to gain earthly glory.

We have no room to criticize the failures of God's people in the past. The history of the world is replete with crusades and wars that were supposedly justified in one way or another. We are still impressed by those who wield power and have impressive titles.

And in our own way we too are tempted to use power to accomplish our goals. We do things the easy way because we think that we can get away with it. We feel entitled and try to climb the ladder of success. We try to force people to do it our way through intimidation and guilt.

But, Jesus did not fall for this temptation. Jesus tells us to forget the glory of earthly power. It is like a vapor ... here today and gone tomorrow. He rejected the idea that his kingdom would be a kingdom of political and military might.

Once again he quoted Scripture in his response to temptation. He said, "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only." (Deuteronomy 6:13)

For Jesus there was only one way, his heavenly Father's way. And that meant rejecting the road of popular opinion and going down the road of redemptive suffering.

This was a very real temptation for Jesus. We will see this a little later on when we think about the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus prayed in that Garden, "If there's any other way " But, once again he conquered temptation when he also prayed, "Not my will but thine be done."

THE TEMPTATION OF FALSE RELIGION

Finally, the devil tries a third temptation. We might call this the temptation of false religion. He takes Jesus to the highest point of the Temple and double dares him to jump off.

The devil said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here." And then the devil even quoted Scripture. He said, "...for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' ..." This is a direct quote from Psalm 91. It's just as some of you may have suspected. The devil is a theologian. The devil is a religious devil.

All of us at one time or another have tried to make a deal with God. We have said something like, "Lord, if I can only have this one thing, I'll serve you forever." But, of course with every bargain there is also an implied threat. We are saying in effect, "If you don't do this for me Lord, I won't serve you."

God is God, and we're not. You don't back the Sovereign Lord of the Universe in a corner or make deals with God. As we discussed last week, God has a plan for our life, and our job is to get in step with God's plan. Our job is not to try and force God to do it our way. Jesus put it this way, once again quoting Scripture, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

There are two common threads in all of these temptations. They all involve achieving the goal by taking the easy way out, and they all involve mistrusting the goodness of God when the going gets rough.

God's Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. God's Spirit led Jesus to the cross. And all along the way there was the temptation to find another way.

The Scripture hints that the temptation of Jesus did not end in the wilderness. The devil merely left to come back again at a more opportune time.

And throughout the ministry of Jesus you can recognize some of those opportune times. Some were times of success when the people wanted to make him king and Peter proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. And some were times of trial as when Jesus was facing the challenge of the cross in the Garden of Gethsemane.

But, perhaps the greatest trial came at the very last when some challenged him from the cross, "Save yourself and come down from the cross! ... Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe."

That sounds a lot like that temptation in the wilderness, the temptation of the devil to come down from the Temple peak. But, once again Jesus recognized that it was a ploy of the evil one. Jesus resisted temptation until the very end, and that turned out to be the greatest victory the world will ever know.

Friends, the wilderness is not God-forsaken. The wilderness does not belong to the devil. God is in the wilderness. God's Spirit is with us and beside us every step of the way.

Last Wednesday some folks marked the beginning of Lent by going to church. Ashes in the sign of the cross were imposed on their heads to remind them of their mortality.

We don't like to remember that. We are tempted to seek a salvation that comes from some other way than the way of the cross.

But, each year in Lent we remember the truth. There is no other salvation than the salvation that God gives us from the cross of Christ.

So once again God invites us to take that journey to the the cross. And on that cross we will see a Savior who refuses to take the easy way out. He refuses to come down from the cross. Instead, He dies for our sins on that cross, and we are saved forever.

Amen.