

Luke 4:1-13

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.'"

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.'"

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.

TEMPTATION

Oscar Wilde once wrote, "I can resist everything but temptation." Unfortunately, that's true of us all, at least some of the time.

The sixty-four dollar question when it comes to temptation is how can we resist it? How can we be what God has called us to be?

When we are in the wilderness of despair and discouragement, how do we avoid the mistake of taking the easy way out?

In order to avoid temptation, we need to understand why we are tempted. Some believe that only the weak are tempted. I disagree. The strong are also tempted. Temptation is a part of life, every life.

Today we learn that Jesus was tempted.

A few weeks ago we talked about the baptism of Jesus. When Jesus was baptized the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

But, look at what happens next. Jesus, the Son of God, the One with whom God was well pleased is led by that same Spirit into the wilderness of temptation.

Don't think that being faithful will end your temptations. Don't think that there is a protective bubble around you because God has called you. Temptation intensifies for those who are faithful and are given great responsibility.

When the Spirit of God comes upon God's Son it sets up an inevitable conflict with the forces of darkness. The call leads to temptation.

THE DEVIL

On the other hand it's important to note that God is not the source of temptation. The Scripture is very clear about this. Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the *devil*." It is the devil that is the source of temptation.

Who is this devil that Jesus meets in the wilderness?

Many of us have images of a horned creature complete with pitchfork and a forked tail. But, in the Bible the devil is not portrayed this way. The devil quotes Scripture and talks about how to best accomplish the work of God's kingdom.

We better rethink the way we portray the devil. The devil is very religious, and his temptation often comes in the form of false piety. Remember that religious people advocated for the crucifixion of Jesus. Down through history terrible things have been done in the name of God.

It's not surprising that a scientist has recently written a book that suggests religion (of any kind) is not the answer. Religion is the problem.

Oddly enough the Bible, at least in part, agrees with that analysis.

Temptation begins when we have a view of God that is wrong. Temptation begins when we serve the God of our imagination instead of the one true God.

Temptation begins when we believe that we get to say who God is and what God wants. Temptation begins when we doubt the goodness of God.

DOUBTING GOD'S GOODNESS

Let's think about the original temptation story, the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis. The "serpent" in that story asks Eve, "Did God really say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

Notice how innocent the question sounds.

This was before the serpent was made to slide along on his belly and be despised by everyone. This serpent was an attractive and smart creature. And he just wanted to ask a simple question about God. He just wanted to talk a little theology. Did God really say that?

That question illustrates the essence of temptation. That question sows the seeds of doubt when it comes to the goodness of God. Surely you've got it wrong. God said that?

You may have noticed that the serpent got it wrong in this story. God didn't say that Adam and Eve couldn't eat from any tree in the garden. God said that they couldn't eat from one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But, the serpent uses a half-truth to introduce doubt into the Garden of Eden. And you see the same pattern in today's lesson. The devil tries to plant the seeds of doubt with Jesus. He says, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple ..."

"If" is a little word, but that little word plays a big role in temptation. Think of how many times our lives have been paralyzed by anxiety and fear because of that little word, "if". What is this happens? What if that happens? Suppose the promises of God aren't true? What if we're just kidding ourselves?

That's the work of the devil. And the devil uses that doubt as a way to disrupt and distort our relationship with God.

The temptation of the serpent succeeded with Adam and Eve. And the story of the Fall has been repeated every hour of every day down through the years. Doubt and distrust of God's goodness creates havoc in the world. It is the source of sin.

Everyone has succumbed to temptation. But, that will change with Jesus. The Bible tells us that Jesus was tempted in every way just as we are except without

sin. (Hebrews 4:15) Jesus will not choose the way of the world, the way of life ruled by doubt and fear, the way of the devil.

In fact that's the point of the temptation story, to show us what Jesus is *not* going to do in his ministry.

THE TEMPTATION OF HUNGER

The first temptation is for Jesus as the Son of God to meet his personal needs and desires. The devil tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread.

This temptation begins with hunger. The Bible tells us that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness without food. He was more than hungry. He was famished. He was at the brink of death.

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.

In this time of great hunger Jesus is tempted to save himself. This temptation foreshadows what will happen on the cross.

As Jesus hangs on the cross the religious leaders say, "He saved others; let him save himself ... if he is the Messiah of God, the chosen one!"

At this point the soldiers representing the powers that be chime in. They say, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself."

And finally even one of the criminals who is being crucified beside Jesus asks, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (See Luke 24:35-39)

Notice how these questions mirror the questions of the devil in the wilderness.

The temptation of Jesus did not end in the wilderness. The Bible tells us that the devil left Jesus until a more opportune time and what more opportune time for testing could there be than when Jesus is hanging in agony on the cross?

In the time of crisis, in the time of great hunger, temptation is at its greatest. But, in the wilderness and on the cross Jesus does not succumb. Jesus' hunger for God's kingdom is greater than his hunger for bread, and Jesus' hunger for the salvation of the world is greater than his desire for personal salvation.

Jesus' ministry is always focused on others, never on himself.

THE TEMPTATION OF POWER

The second temptation is a direct appeal to the human desire for power. Jesus is offered the authority and glory of all the kingdoms of the world.

The devil 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. It might be hard to believe in God, but when we look at the world it is hard not to believe in the devil.

In a world such as this, a world that is dangerous and corrupt, there is a temptation to fight fire with fire. And that was what the devil was tempting Jesus to do.

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.

For Jesus this is a temptation to please people instead of obeying the will of his Heavenly Father. Many in those days thought the Messiah would bring political change through the power of a military revolution.

In fact Jesus’ own disciples thought this was true.

Remember when the Apostle Peter said that Jesus was the Messiah? Jesus agreed with what Peter said, but then Jesus defined the role of the Messiah in a way that was foreign to Peter’s understanding.

The Messiah would not be a conquering hero. The Messiah would be a suffering servant. There would be a cross in the Messiah’s future.

Peter actually took Jesus aside and rebuked him. But, Jesus rebuked Peter. He said, “Out of my sight Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

When Jesus rejects this temptation He shows us that His kingdom is going to be different from the kingdoms that have come before.

Jesus will not continue the cycle of violence and political manipulation. Jesus will not lord it over others.

Jesus will be Lord because he serves others. Jesus' mission will be about saving others, not about asserting worldly power through military might.

THE TEMPTATION OF FALSE RELIGION

The third temptation is the temptation to jump from the pinnacle of the temple. If Jesus could do this it would wow the crowds. It would be a way of "proving" that He was the Messiah.

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.

I told you. The devil is a religious devil. This is when the devil is most devilish, when he twists Scripture to achieve evil.

Instead of embracing suffering and pain the devil suggests that Jesus should do a really big miracle in plain sight. In this way he can prove that He is really the Messiah.

Once again the devil uses the little word, "if". If you're really the Messiah this miracle is not so great.

This leap from the Jerusalem temple is almost a parody of the crucifixion. Instead of being lifted up to save others Jesus is lifted up to bolster his own reputation.

Jesus tells Satan to get lost. And he does. But, he will come back soon.

THE EASY WAY AND GOD'S WAY

There are two common threads in all of these temptations. First, they involve bringing in the Kingdom by taking the easy way out. And second, 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.

Jesus did not succumb to any of these temptations. His ministry would not be about personal gain, power or glory. The reason Jesus is able to reject the temptation of the devil is that He understands His true mission.

In Luke's gospel we don't have to wait long to learn what that mission will be. Right after today's passage comes Jesus' sermon in Nazareth. And in that short sermon we hear a radically different vision of the Kingdom of God.

We learn that God's kingdom will not come from the top down. God's kingdom will come from the bottom up. It will be good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind. The oppressed will go free. (Luke 4:18-19)

And it is this unwavering vision that sustained Jesus all the way to the cross and beyond. He was tempted in every way just as we are and yet he did not sin.

RESISTING TEMPTATION

We are not like Jesus. We sin. We succumb to temptation. We give in to the lure of self-gratification, power and glory. Even in the church we often abandon our true mission for these misguided goals.

We may have the best of intentions. But, you know what road is paved with good intentions!

As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans (7:19, MsgB) "I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway." "I can resist everything except temptation." That describes the Apostle Paul, and that describes us as well.

And then a few verses down the Apostle exclaims in despair, "I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?" Romans 7:24 (MsgB)

We, of course, cannot do what only God's Son could do. Jesus maintained a fidelity to God that we cannot imitate perfectly. Jesus sought the will of God in every situation, and that is what made him sinless.

But, in Christ we also learn that we are no longer imprisoned by the temptations and sins of the past. Our story can have a different ending.

Quite often after our confession of sin I use 2 Corinthians 5:17 as a declaration of pardon. It goes, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

This means that in Christ not only are our sins forgiven; we are also given a new nature. We are no longer slaves to sin but are free to love God and live in ways that are in line with God's purposes. We can live into the hope of the Kingdom that comes.

The season of Lent gives us yet another opportunity to confess our sins and go in a different direction.

The best way to do that is not to spend too much time worrying about all that we have done wrong. The best way to do that is to think about our true mission as revealed in life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

One of the reasons that people keep making the same old mistakes and succumbing to the same old temptations is that they have believed the devil's lie that things are hopeless.

The devil tells us, "You can't change. You can't make any other choice. You have failed in the past, and you will fail in the future."

Circumstances require you to be realistic. Just do what is necessary to make ends meet today. Just struggle for your daily bread and forget about the future."

The testimony of Jesus gives stands over against the pessimism of the devil.

Notice that when the devil gave his corrupted and pessimistic view, Jesus responded with God's view. He responded with God's Word.

Jesus said, "*It is written* one does not live by bread alone.
It is written worship the Lord your God and serve him only.
It is written do not put the Lord your God to the test."

In order to resist temptation we must answer that temptation with God's Word. We must know God's Word by heart, and we must keep God's Word close to our hearts.

We must learn to love what God loves.

We must learn to define ministry not by what pleases us but by what pleases God.

We must quit treating God as a means to an end and instead start worshipping the one true God revealed in Jesus.

This is how we resist temptation.

Someone once asked me, "Do you believe in the devil?"

And I responded, "No, I believe in Jesus Christ."

God's ability to save as revealed in Jesus is stronger than the power of the devil's temptation.

I believe that the kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. And I believe that one day the devil's temptations will be a thing of the past.

Amen.