

Preparing for the Test

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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.

PREPARING FOR THE TEST

Why do we repeat the Apostle's Creed (or some other confession of faith) each week?

We want to be prepared for the test.

An important test is coming, and the answers can be found in the Creed. In the Creed we find the basic facts concerning what we believe.

I bet some of you didn't know that a test was coming.

But, it is.

And we need to get ready.

In our Bible study this past week some of us shared that we have recurring dream.

We are scheduled to take a test, but we haven't prepared, and are anxiously trying to make it to the classroom on time.

I bet some of you might have had a similar dream.

But, the test I'm talking about won't take place in a classroom. No, this test will occur in the wilderness.

This test will come at a time when we feel like we're all alone. This test will come a time when our doubts loom large.

At a time like this we need answers.

And so each week we prepare for this test that is surely coming. We say what we believe together.

This act of worship is important.

We need answers that are not only in our head but also in our heart.

That's what our Scripture lesson for today is all about as well.

The story of Jesus gives us answers to use when the world puts us to the test and asks us hard questions about the faith.

Why do we have this story?
How did it come to us?

Think about it.

The only actors in this story are Jesus and the Devil. No one else is present.

Apparently Jesus told his disciples about it.

And I think he told the disciples this story to teach them a lesson.

Just as temptation came to Jesus in the wilderness so temptation would come to them.

And they needed to know how to deal with it.

PREPARING FOR THE WILDERNESS

Jesus was preparing future disciples for their own wilderness experience.

They too would experience conflict and be asked difficult questions by the evil ones in the world.

They needed to be ready for that test.

And we need to be ready as well.

It's important to note that though the wilderness is a place of despair for many, this is not necessarily the case. In the Bible the wilderness is often a place where faith is born.

The wilderness can be a place where we obtain spiritual depth and power for life and ministry.

This wilderness path is not a path that any of us would choose on our own.

And yet each year during the season of Lent we are encouraged to spend some time in the wilderness with Jesus.

For forty days we too are led by the Spirit to that place of temptation.

What can we learn from our time in the wilderness?

NOT ALONE

First, we learn that we are not alone in the wilderness.

In Luke's gospel, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, but the Spirit does not drop him off there to fend for himself. The Spirit goes with him.

Our lesson for today tells us that Jesus has this wilderness experience when he was "full of the Holy Spirit" and that he had returned from the Jordan.

What happened at the Jordan river?
He was baptized.

And as Jesus was praying, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and a voice from heaven said,

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

So, when Jesus goes into the wilderness, he goes with God's presence and God's promise.

We too go into the wilderness with God's presence and God's promise. As disciples of Jesus, we too have been filled with the Spirit of God, and we too have been called the children of God.

In the stark and lonely wilderness the devil, the father of all lies will try challenge this.

He will try to get us to doubt the goodness of God.

But, his deceptions are not true.
We can trust in the goodness of God.

God is always with us and for us.

God led his people in the wilderness with a cloud by day and fiery pillar of fire by night.

And in the same way God leads us during the day and during the darkest night.

No wilderness is so remote that the love of God does not reach it. There is no such thing as a godforsaken land.

HUNGER

The second thing we learn from this story is that temptation often begins with great hunger.

Jesus was tempted for forty days in the wilderness and during that time Jesus didn't eat anything and he was starving.

Some of us at Bible study wondered if anyone could live for forty days without eating.

Most of us would say no.

But, of course nothing is impossible with God.

And the point of these forty days in the wilderness is symbolic.

Just as God's people wandered in the wilderness for forty years so Jesus was in the wilderness without food for forty days.

And he was hungry.

Most of us don't like to skip a meal, much less spend forty days in the wilderness without food.

But, many of us do live with a deep hunger in our lives.

Maybe we hunger for an intimate and meaningful relationship.

Maybe we hunger for success.

Maybe we hunger for acceptance.

Maybe we hunger for health.

The list goes on and on.
We all have a hunger in our life.

This is our Achille's heel so to speak.

And guess where temptation strikes first?

Temptation strikes first in those areas of life where we are hungry.

Temptation comes in those areas of life where we have the greatest need or where our fears dominate.

NOT BY BREAD ALONE

In the first temptation, the devil tempts Jesus with food.

He tells him,
"These stones in the desert look a lot like bread.
Turn the stones into bread.
Since you're the Son of God, this shouldn't be so hard."

Jesus responded with Scripture,
"One does not live by bread alone."

Now, we're not tempted to turn stones into bread ... mainly because we can't do it!
But, we are tempted to fill a spiritual need with something physical.

The reality shows on TV are about extreme cases of this temptation.

Some eat too much.

Some fill their lives with too much stuff.

Some spend too much.
But, all these things stem from the same problem.

We have a hunger that runs so deep that even the blue plate special won't fill us up.

We need more than bread.

We need the bread of life.

So, this is the first answer on our pop quiz in the wilderness. This is what we need to remember.

We do not live by bread alone.

Write that down.

It is going to be on the test!

We must remember this and stand up to those voices in the world that would suggest otherwise. They tell us if only we had a little more, then we would be happy.

But, that's a deception.

You cannot fill a spiritual need by driving a Mercedes-Benz.

It just doesn't work.

WORSHIP GOD NOT POWER

The second temptation in Luke's gospel goes like this.

The devil takes Jesus up to a high place, shows him all the kingdoms of the world and then says,

"All these kingdoms are mine. All you have to do is worship me and I'll give them to you."

Our Bible study thought that this wasn't a very good temptation. Why would Jesus even be tempted to worship the devil?

After all he was Jesus. He knew who he was talking to, and he knew how to answer. Right?

As it turns out, Jesus did know all those things. He dismissed the devil's deception by once again quoting Scripture.

“Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”

But, how was this a temptation for Jesus?

The crowds that followed Jesus and Jesus’ own disciples wanted him to say one thing: I am the Messiah.

If Jesus had said this, the crowds and his disciples would have joined the army of God against the Romans right then and there.

You see, in the Hebrew Bible and in popular culture, the Messiah was seen as politician/general with divine sanction.

That’s why the crowds followed Jesus. That’s why everyone was talking about Jesus.

That may have been why the disciples dropped everything to follow Jesus. They thought Jesus would be the one who would bring about the revolution.

Jesus consistently resisted this temptation.

By the way this is the one temptation that comes back. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asks his Father, “Is there some other way to bring in the kingdom other than the cross?”

I don’t know how much time passed between Jesus asking this question and then following up with a statement of faith, “Not my will but thine be done.”

But, I would guess that there was a pregnant pause at this point.

This was the true last temptation of Jesus. It was the temptation to do it another way.

It was the temptation to take the path of power and glory instead of the path of suffering and service.

But, as the Bible tells us, though he was tempted in every way just as us, he did not succumb to temptation. (Hebrews 4:15)

When we say that “might makes right” we are not worshipping God. We are worshipping the devil and the kingdoms of the world.

When we believe that winning by any means possible is justified, we are following the devil instead of the Lord.

We know this is true.

We know that to follow Jesus is to deny ourselves, take up a cross and follow him.

But, what we know and what we have the courage to do are often two different things.

Who doesn't like to win, right?

If you follow Jesus you'll win so much ... no, that's not the message

Some victories come at too high a cost.

If we must sacrifice what we believe in most deeply in order to obtain that victory, then maybe it's not a victory at all.

When we neglect all that we hold sacred in order to obtain a earthly victories, have we really won anything?

When we say that we worship God only, it's not just a statement we make.

It is a life that we live.

Write this down. It will be on the test.

“Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”

POOR THEOLOGY

The third and final temptation involves the Bible's version of extreme sports.

The devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and says,

“Since you’re the Son of God, throw yourself down from this high place. After all the Bible says God won’t let his chosen one be harmed. Angels will swoop down and catch you before you hit bottom.”

I have often struggled to characterize this temptation.

The first temptation is the temptation of materialism. The second temptation is the temptation of power.

But, what is this third temptation?
How might we characterize it?

I would suggest this is the temptation of poor theology.

This temptation suggests that we can manipulate God into doing what we want God to do.

This is very common in our world today.
People cherry pick a few verse out of context and then make the most ridiculous claims.

God wants you rich, thin, popular, healed ... you name it.

All you have to do is claim these six promises or follow these eight steps, and God will do what you want Him to do ... guaranteed.

Nonsense.

The devil quotes Scripture, but he does it out of context.

One of the reasons that we study the Bible together and insist that our leaders be trained is that we do not want to make this mistake.

We want to proclaim God’s Word in context.
We don’t want to create a new religion by stringing unrelated verses together in a way that makes for a religion that puts God to the test instead of putting us to the test.

That’s the key.

Jesus answers the devil's temptation of self-centered bad theology by saying,

"The Bible also says, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Were you ever in a class where one of the students thought that he knew more than the teacher?

It is sometimes hard to learn in a class like that because the "know it all student" is often putting the teacher to the test instead of allowing the teacher to teach.

There are some Christians who are like this.
They are forever putting God to the test.

They say in effect,
"Yes, God I'll believe in you if you heal me or give me what I want or prevent this tragedy from befalling me."

And no matter what happens in their life it is never enough.

They continue to put God to the test.
They doubt the goodness of God.

We never obtain faith by holding God hostage, by putting God to the test. No matter how many signs we are given, it will not be enough.

Why? Because we have a basic misunderstanding.
When we put God to the test, we doubt the goodness of God.

That was, you'll remember, the basic sin of Adam and Eve. They doubted the goodness of God.

And more than that, they wanted to be like God.
They wanted to be in charge.

Any theology that doubts the goodness of God and puts God to the test is bad theology.

Write this down.

It will be on the temptation test.

“Don’t doubt the goodness of God. Don’t put God to the test.”

OUR TEMPTATION

You may have guessed that today’s lesson is about more than Jesus overcoming temptation.

It is a model for those of us who cave in to pressure each day. It teaches us what we need to know.

Jesus doesn’t need to turn stones into bread.
He is the bread of life.

Jesus has no need for worldly authority.
He is Lord of all.

Jesus doesn’t need a sign from God.
He is the sign from God.

We know these things.
But, in our wilderness we still struggle to put that knowledge into practice.

In our lesson for today Jesus is tempted to be someone other than who he was called to be.

The temptation for us is to forget who Jesus is and in so doing forget who we are called to be as his disciples.

We don’t have power over creation.
We can’t change stones into bread.
Instead we are the recipients and the stewards of all that God has made.

We are the worshippers, not the ones to be worshipped. We are the servants of the Lord, not the lord of the manor.

We aren’t invincible.
We are finite. We are mortal.

We don’t summon God.

God summons and sends us.

Jesus was God in the flesh, and yet, the one without sin takes on all our temptations.

He knows what it's like to be human, and hungry.
And he has mercy on us.

He goes on to feed the hungry and heal the sick in Galilee.
He travels to Jerusalem and is despised and rejected by the worldly powers.

And not only is his foot dashed against a stone, his body is crushed for our transgressions.

Come with Jesus these 40 days as the Spirit leads him into the wilderness.

We know the story. He will be tested.

But, we will be tested as well.
In the wilderness of our life we are put to the test.

Let Jesus give us the answers that we need.

Amen.