

## **Could it be Satan?**

6 March 2022: First Sunday in Lent

Preaching Text: Luke 4:1-13

My hometown mascot was the “Red Devil.” Everywhere you looked in town, there were pictures of devils of various types. They were on our book covers at school. They were on the football ribbons everyone wanted to wear on Fridays. At pep rallies and football games, there was a cute Devil handing out candy to kids. Before football games, local ministers would pray for “the safety of the devils on the field tonight.” You can imagine that this created a lot of confusion in a young kid growing up in a Christian home. I wanted candy at the pep rallies, but I was taught to be scared of the devil! Isn’t that how he gets you? Similarly, Christians in America in 2022 seem just as confused by the concepts of “sin” and “the devil”. On one hand, we have Christians who can make almost anything into a sin or temptation from the evil one and on the other hand, we have Christians who see sin and the devil as something completely antiquated that really shouldn’t even be a part of “enlightened” Christian faith. Of course, many of us fall in between on this spectrum of belief. In today’s lectionary passage we are confronted with the issues of sin and the devil once again in the story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert by the devil in Luke 4:1-13.

**Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,<sup>2</sup> where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.<sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”<sup>5</sup> The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the**

kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. <sup>7</sup> If you worship me, it will all be yours.” <sup>8</sup> Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” <sup>9</sup> The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. <sup>10</sup> For it is written: “‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; <sup>11</sup> they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” <sup>12</sup> Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” <sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

This story sounds like something out of a fairy tale, right? We aren’t seriously supposed to believe that Jesus spent 40 whole days fasting in the desert and then met the devil? Really? While we may not think of temptation as little devils perched on our shoulders trying to tell us what to do, if you’ve spent any time being a human, which I am guessing most of you reading this have, you know that regardless of how literally we read this account, temptation in 2022 is still a very real thing. You can call it whatever you want, but there is clearly something broken about the human condition. Just look around and you can see the mess we make of almost everything we touch. And we all know that this condition is constantly calling to us, urging us to participate in our own destruction, both at a personal and social level. So how do we break free of this compulsion? How do we resist its pull? What can this seemingly fanciful account of Jesus’ temptation teach us about the nature of sin and temptation?

Before we go further, I want to note that the Greek term for “temptation” can also mean “test”. This does give a new layer of meaning that we will explore going forward (and may help you understand the passage better if the term “temptation” is uncomfortable for you). The temptations that the devil offers up to Jesus are three fold beginning with Jesus’ bodily need for food. The Scripture tells us that Jesus ate no food during these 40 days in the desert and He would have been really, really hungry. Medical science tells us that if a human being is without food for 40 days, they would be in the beginnings of severe symptoms of starvation. This is the state Jesus would be in when the devil dares Him to make bread from stone “if you are the Son of God”. Here Satan uses a natural need as a way to tempt Jesus, which is a very Satan thing to do. The second temptation is tied to power and prestige. The devil tells Jesus that He can have all the authority of all the kingdoms of the world in an instant in exchange for worshipping the devil. This seems like an odd temptation to use since the devil does not have authority over the world (God does) and Jesus, being fully God, would already have the authority that the devil is offering Him. But rather than waiting until the right time, Jesus can have all of this now if He just will change who He worships. Satan loves to use the temptation of “now!”. In the third temptation, the devil gives up on the “worship me” angle and again tries to tempt Jesus with the “if you are the Son of God” line, but this time, he attempts to appeal to the desire to create a scene, to create a buzz, to be a sensation that everyone will talk about. If Jesus really is the Son of God, wouldn’t He want everyone to know about it? The devil is saying, “Test it and see! God will protect you and keep you safe like the Scripture tells you!”

While these three temptations come from different angles, they do have something in common. They are asking Jesus to abandon His identity as God’s chosen and chose a path of

Jesus' own choosing, rather than trusting in the timing of God. They are asking Him to test His relationship with God, rather than having faith in it. The devil wants Jesus to doubt that He is enough; to doubt that He is the beloved and chosen Son of God. The devil wants Jesus to believe that He needs something more to complete who He already is. These temptations are directed at the humanity of Jesus. Will Jesus have faith to follow the Spirit?

I believe this is the key temptation for us as well. Christians often fret and worry over committing the "big sins" (which are often the sins we don't do, but we can judge others by) while what is actually destroying our spiritual life- and power it can have- are the "small" temptations that are pulling us away from God and from the best that God has for us. And for each of us, those temptations will be different. They may not be exactly what Jesus was tempted with here in Scripture. But, as theologian David Lose notes, temptations are "all the same, as they seek to shift our allegiance, trust and confidence away from God and toward some substitute that promises a more secure identity."

Think about the messages we hear every day through all of the media we consume. So much of advertising from soap to beer to politicians tests us by telling us we are not enough, that we should live in fear of that inadequacy and that if we just trusted them by buying their product, whether that's the right scent of soap, or the best drink at the party or the right vote on issues we care about, we will be safe and whole. It's an aspect of life that is so omnipresent that we hardly even notice it's there. But it's there in every ad break on the radio, Netflix or YouTube. Every banner ad on every website and app we use on our phones. And of course, there is not a sin in buying the things we need to sustain our lives, but so often we are tested to

believe that what we need is not enough. We should want more. The algorithms of all our apps work hard to keep us on the internet for hours at a time so they can show us just how inadequate we are so we'll consume more, both of the apps themselves and the products they promote. And this seems innocent, but studies conducted by social media giants themselves show that their products are bad for our mental health because of how they make us feel. They stir up anger, resentment and jealousy. And we all fall for it, no matter our age or what media we use. This is just one example of how temptations work.

So what can we do? Jesus provides us an example. It helps to remember that this story of temptation happens right after Jesus is baptized and hears that He is the beloved Son of God. Then Scripture tells us the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus knows that the Spirit is still leading him, even through long days in the desert and the temptations of the devil. This focus gives Him the confidence in His relationship with God so He doesn't have to give in to the testing that He faces. He stays focused on the mission that He has been sent to do. Jesus uses the story told through Scripture to remind Himself (and the devil) that Jesus is part of the larger story of salvation and the working of God in the world. This focus on the wider story of redemption allows Jesus to even face the test when the devil tries to use Scripture against Jesus to distract Him from His mission.

This Lent, we as a church in Sunday School and in small groups are working through the book, *The Walk: Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life* by Adam Hamilton. I would encourage you to get the book and find a class where you can delve deeper into this walk with our community. The first chapter of the book discusses the practice of worship and why that is

important. I agree with theologian David Lose that one of the reasons why we gather in worship each week is that “we come to church to be reminded of, and given again, our identity as beloved children of God.” We are reminded of how much we are loved. That God was willing to be incarnated as a human, live among us, be tested and tempted as we are, teach us how to live an abundant life, and ultimately die on a cross to show us the deepest depths of that love. We are reminded of that grace that never lets us go, that continues to call us, to care for us no matter where we go. This Lent, may our primary task be not to fast because it’s what we “should do” but because we want to fill our hearts and minds anew with this knowledge and love. Amen.

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