

Temptations, Tests and Trust  
The United Church of Broomfield  
March 6, 2022

Luke 4:1-13 (KJV)

<sup>1</sup> And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, <sup>2</sup> Being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered. <sup>3</sup> And the devil said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread. <sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered him, saying, It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God. <sup>5</sup> And the devil, taking him up into a high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. <sup>6</sup> And the devil said unto him, All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. <sup>7</sup> If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine. <sup>8</sup> And Jesus answered and said unto him, Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. <sup>9</sup> And he brought him to Jerusalem, and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from hence: <sup>10</sup> For it is written, He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee: <sup>11</sup> And in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. <sup>12</sup> And Jesus answering said unto him, It is said, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. <sup>13</sup> And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season.

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On this First Sunday in Lent, the gospel reading is about what happened immediately after Jesus' baptism. It's a familiar story. As soon as the heavenly voice has assured him that he was God's beloved Son, Jesus is led into the wilderness — the desert — to be tempted. We know what that word commonly means: someone or something tries to get you to do something you shouldn't (or maybe to not do something you should). If you think of your own experience, you know that temptation can often arise within yourself; for example, "It's snowing today, maybe I'll just sleep in this morning instead of going to church." But at the end of our account from Luke, we're told that, "when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season." The Greek word used here [pi-rad-zo] can be translated as temptation or test.

While *tempting* a person — trying to get that person to do the wrong thing — is bad, *testing* someone isn't necessarily bad. Testing can be good. When you pass a test, whether in school, or to get your driver's license, or anything else, it's a sign that you have certain qualifications or have reached a certain skill level. Even if you fail a test, you have a realistic evaluation of your abilities and can see where you need to improve. We even test ourselves, taking on tasks that we're not sure we can accomplish. It's often argued, semantically, that temptations (i.e. bad) are traps, whereas tests (i.e. good) are opportunities. I'll let you decide when and how to engage in such debates.

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So, is Jesus being tempted or tested? It may seem obvious: "the tempter" is trying to get him to sin (do something that would put him in conflict with God's teachings), BUT we're told at the beginning that he was led into the wilderness by the *Spirit* that had descended on him at his baptism. This suggests that God intended this encounter with the tempter. Matthew's account says clearly that he was led into the wilderness "to be tempted by the devil." It leads us to consider if God is using the devil as a tool to test Jesus. We must question if God **would** test Jesus (or anyone for that matter) AND if we take this figure of the devil seriously;

many people, including some Christians don't. Of course, anyone who isn't wearing rose-colored glasses knows that there is evil in the world, but the idea of "a personal devil," however, is another matter.

As a congregation, we've worked through the book of Job and read that "the adversary" or "the Sa-tan" is one of the members of God's heavenly council who gets permission from God to test Job's faithfulness by bringing disasters upon him. In the third chapter of Zechariah, the high priest Joshua is being accused of some crime by "the Adversary," but God says, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan!" In both these passages the Satan seems like an overly zealous prosecuting attorney, trying to get innocent people in trouble.

And by the time of our gospel, Satan is seen as a definitely evil figure. He has moved, if you wish, from being that prosecutor willing to pad his resume by convicting the innocent to being a completely corrupt district attorney. He's in rebellion against God, trying to overthrow the divine government. And now he wants to corrupt the one God has sent into the world.

As the devil tempts Jesus, based on how Jesus responds, it is possible for us to see God using those temptations as tests, preparing Jesus for what he will face in his ministry and giving him opportunities to see that he can succeed before the final conflict comes. Would God do that? Are we comfortable with such an idea? We've all experienced conflict, struggle and even evil in our lives to varying degrees. If you've been fortunate enough to get through those times to the other side, have you ever reflected and thought, "I can't believe I survived that," or "I guess I'm stronger than I thought, or "was God testing me?"

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The gospel tells us that Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights *before the temptations/tests* began. Jesus is hungry...and probably confused, delirious and irritable. So, in such a weakened state, the devil suggests that Jesus could use his power as the Son of God to turn a stone into bread. There's nothing wrong with eating if you're hungry or using your abilities to get food. But the way that the tempter introduces his suggestion, "If you are the Son of God ...," is a tipoff: "Do you really believe that God has declared you, His Son? Can you really depend on God?" And Jesus sees that that question, and not just whether he can get some food, is the issue. So, he replies by quoting from Deuteronomy something that the Israelites were told when they were also wandering in the desert and complained about a lack of food: "One does not live by bread alone." We live by the creative and sustaining power of God.

Subtlety hasn't worked, so the devil tries the direct approach. Showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world over which he claims to have authority, the devil offers them to Jesus — *if* Jesus will just worship him. Now, Jesus could say that the devil has power in the world only to the extent that God allows it, but that isn't the point here. Jesus may be hungry and exhausted, but he knows what the devil is trying to do. So, Jesus responds, again with words from Deuteronomy: "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."

"So, you want to throw Bible verses around, do you?" the devil thinks. He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and tells him that if he believes God's word, he should be willing to leap into space because it says in the 91st Psalm that God will command her angels to protect you so that no harm will come to you. That is indeed in the Bible, and sometimes it may be a very helpful promise. In some situations, you may need to take big risks and trust that God will take care of you. But not every word in the Bible is helpful in every circumstance. When Jesus quoted scripture verses before, he wasn't using them as magic formulas — Jesus quoted scripture that he'd studied, that he'd prayed about, that he'd wrestled with and knew in his heart. He quoted scripture as inspired words that were relevant to the situation at hand. Now the situation is

one in which he's being told that he should demand dramatic proof of God's faithfulness, so he responds with a quite relevant word of scripture, again from Deuteronomy: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." It's that same Greek word, [pi-rad-zo].

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Jesus passes the test. He defeats the devil, continues his mission and never gets tested again.

That's how we'd like it to be – a "they lived happily ever after-like ending" ... particularly in our own lives. Once we've passed a test, overcome a temptation, we expect to never have to endure that again – it's only right...right? But we know that in our own lives a temptation once defeated may return. We also know that a test successfully passed can prepare us to face greater difficulties in the future. The same happened to Jesus, repeatedly and ultimately. The devil tempted Jesus with power, authority, and DOUBT. Satan's strategy was clear: he wanted to get at Jesus' trust in God, to turn it toward something else. The devil was challenging Jesus at the most fundamental level, for there is nothing more basic than trusting and worshiping God above all else.

There are obstacles in our lives and likely always will be. There is most assuredly evil in the world – some of it, we'll have to deal with directly. Jesus remained faithful to God and his mission all the way to the cross, where he was victorious. As we journey through this Lenten season and prepare to deal with the challenges of our lives, the same question is posed to us, "in the face of evil, will we place our trust in God?"

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