

Tempted and Tested

Luke 4:1-13

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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Is it a bad thing to be “tempted?” That word! – it has kind of an *evil* spin to it, doesn’t it? And with us going into Lent, a season where people give up things as a devotion, as a way of showing gratitude to our Lord, *temptation* is made all the worse! As if we didn’t get tempted enough in life anyway! But here’s the thing: the Bible, especially the New Testament, has a different idea, a bigger idea. The same word in the original language that gets translated “tempting” also means *testing*; and in the noun form, it means “trial.” *Testing* yourself can be good! – especially if you’re trying to grow. The Marine Corps does it all the time with their recruits. You do it when you embark on a stringent exercise program; when you decide to increase something, whether the weight you’re working out with, or the pace you’re running at, or even the distance you run – you’re testing yourself, aren’t you? In the Old Testament, Satan’s original, legitimate job was to test people for God. If you read the book of Job God even sends Satan out to do some testing *for* him! Indeed, the name Satan is a Hebrew word that means “tester” or in some cases “tempter.”

Then there’s the concept of “trial.” It’s just like testing, except that you have a judgment at the end. You either do good or you don’t. And there might be a penalty. But there might be a reward if you do well. This story from Luke, this temptation of Jesus, is an example of a trial. If Jesus doesn’t pass this trial, there will be penalties – for the world. But if he does – well, more on that later. This story, right at the beginning of Lent, shows us how *we* should respond when we come to the time of temptation and testing. Or better yet, how we can come out good in our times of trial.

Jesus had just been baptized when the Spirit led him away, out into the wilderness, alone. You're easy pickings for the Tempter when you're by yourself. You'd think up front that Jesus would have no problems with the Tempter. But this was no ordinary testing. So Jesus was out there all alone, not even near a city or anything like civilization. According to all three of the Gospels that have the temptation story, Jesus was out there without food for forty days. Matthew tells us that he was fasting, and that makes sense; why else would you go without food for that long? It's at least possible that Jesus' forty *days* are supposed to remind you of Israel's forty *years*. And you know who was waiting for him there in the desert. I guess he figured he would wait to put the heavy testing on him until Jesus was weak, because he waited until the forty days were up. If I had starved and been alone for forty days, I'd be mighty weak.

At the end of the forty days, Jesus, being human just as we are, was totally famished. I bet he was just skin and bones! And so the devil started out with what should have been an easy "win": he tempted him with food; but in a way you might not expect. "If you are the Son of God," he says, and then comes the temptation, a temptation about *control over the things of the world*, and it sounds so *reasonable!* That's always the way, isn't it? We can rationalize how reasonable a thing is, how *sensible*, and come up with all kinds of reasons to justify what we want to do. "Go ahead!" the devil says, "you're starved. You're the Son of God, right? You can fix your *nutritional situation* right now!" *And it makes sense.* In fact, if Jesus *is* the Son of God, why *doesn't* he use some of that power, quick-like, to feed himself? If he dies out there

in the desert, there's not gonna *be* any ministry – or, at the end, any cross. Just another set of bones being bleached by the desert sun. So, go ahead, Jesus! Take care of yourself! What could be more important?

Well, that's the way *we* often go about things, it's the trap we fall into. In the name of "taking care of ourselves," we'll do all sorts of things. Things that put *ourselves* and our own interests first. Things that ignore our higher calling to be God's own, and to give God *First Place*. Whatever happened to letting *God* take care of you? Whatever happened to trusting God? Don't we pray "Give us this day our daily bread," expecting it to happen? You bet we do. But then we forget; and we try to take care of everything by ourselves; and we end up trying to act like God, and control our world. We try to *be* God.

That's what this temptation was for Jesus - he was being tested to see if he would try to *be* God. If he gave in, and "created" bread for himself, he'd be assuming the role of God the Creator, *and abandoning the mission God sent him on, the mission to be human and die on a cross*. You might say, "what about the miracles? the healings?" Think back – they were all for other people. In his life and ministry, even while dying on the cross, Jesus *never* used his power as God to help himself – it was *always* to help others. But here we are, before he's even begun his ministry, and the devil is trying to get him to forget about that already. If Jesus can't be fully human, people, then the cross has no meaning. And he couldn't be fully human if he used his power, his *God*-power, for himself.

So, he didn't give in. That answer he gave is incomplete, as you know. "One does not live by bread alone," Jesus said, and every Jew of his day knew the rest of *that* Scripture: "but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Take that, Satan! Faced with the most powerful kind of temptation, Jesus gave God First Place, and survived this first test, came out good in this trial. Control of the things of this world pales in comparison to doing God's will – or at least, it should. This first test Jesus passes by giving the control to God, giving God his rightful place.

If the first temptation was about control of the material things of the world, the second one was about control over *people*.

Imagine you're in a control room, with oh, a couple of hundred TV monitors. Every nation in the world is shown on those monitors; and only the best stuff - the military parades, the best art, the finest achievements - is showing on those monitors. That's what the Tempter was doing with Jesus - showing him all the power and authority and wealth that there was in the world. If human needs were the issue before, *power* was the issue now. Hunger is pretty easily satisfied. But the desire for power! - well, that's a lot longer lasting, once you get it; and it's much harder to satisfy. The philosopher Nietzsche talked about how human beings, at a basic level, have a "will to power"; we all want control, and we want it most of all over *other people*. If you aren't familiar with Nietzsche, he's the philosopher Hitler read and drew from. That "authority and power" that the Tempter was showing Jesus would have meant nothing if it was only over a bunch of inanimate things like artwork and magnificent buildings. It was

control over *people* – that’s what the Tempter was offering him; control over the *people* who produced these magnificent things. How powerful that temptation would be for us! Or actually *is* – if you consider the “will to power” of most successful politicians. When you get that power, you control the lives of others – sometimes indirectly, as in passing laws that others have to live by, sometimes directly, as when a President orders men and women to go off to war. At some level *all* of us would love to take control over others – because then we’d be free from the possibility of being hurt or feeling pain.

The flip side of this coin is our own egos. If you could make other people do what you wanted them to, just *think* of all the great things you could accomplish. Everybody would want world peace, of course. But think of the other things. Why, you could start a program to wipe out hunger. Or illiteracy. Or crime. Or prejudice. Or - whatever. Without any obstacles! And of course, *you’d get the credit*. I think that’s what this “temptation” is about. It’s about getting what *you want* from this power. Jesus would have been a great ruler over all the world – just think about that. What a world with Jesus at the helm!

Jesus can have all of this, says the Tempter; but there’s a catch. “If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” The literal meaning of the original language is that Jesus will throw himself down at the devil’s feet – a gesture of worship and submission reserved only for God. The Tempter even tries to soft-sell it to Jesus. The original language has a subtlety it’s hard to translate into English. The devil is saying, “Just worship me *once*, Jesus, just *once*, and you’ll have all of this unbelievable power. I can do this for you – all I’m looking for is a little worship. Just throw yourself right down, and

you can take that power today!” The end justifies the means. “You can make this world the greatest place, Jesus, because you’ll have total control. Just throw yourself down right here, and it’s all yours.”

Jesus, looking down on all of that glory and power, remembered the first thing a Jew says each morning upon rising: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart and mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he remembered something else that came a few verses later, that *God alone* is to be worshipped and served. And maybe he remembered something else: why he came in the first place. He came to give it all up, all the power; he came to die on a cross. You’ve heard it over and over again, that early hymn from the 2nd chapter of Philippians: Jesus “emptied himself” of his power, of his “God-ness,” and fulfilled the mission God sent him to do.

Now, the Tempter is nothing if not persistent. Temptation is always like that; if it came to us only once, we could resist almost any temptation easily. But we get tempted over and over again, and the sheer persistence of it all wears us down sometimes. And then we drop our guard, and leave ourselves wide open, and we run the risk of giving in. It seems faintly ridiculous that the Tempter actually quotes scripture to Jesus. Really, he *misuses* it – because the scripture he quotes from Psalm 91 is about *trusting* God, not *testing* him. If the first temptation was about control over the material things of this world, and the second about control over people, this third one is the worst – *it’s about control over God*. “Go ahead!” says the Tempter, “Take the leap! If you really are the

son of God, he'll *have* to come to your rescue. He said he would in Scripture, didn't he?" The Tempter is testing Jesus to see if he'll test God. And what if he does? What would that mean? It would mean that the mission Jesus was sent to fulfill was aborted. You can look at this last temptation in the light of the cross. It was absolutely necessary for us and for our salvation that Jesus *not* test God, not try to control God, and therefore avoid death. That's true because if he had avoided death, there would have been no sacrifice on the cross on our behalf, and for the world. Here was an early attempt by the Tempter to get Jesus thinking that way, so that when the time came for him to suffer for our redemption, he would try to escape, with the help of God. You can almost imagine the Tempter popping up in Gethsemane and saying, "Look! You already got God to save you once before, back there when you jumped off that high place. God will surely do it now, as you face the cross – won't he?" Given the angst of the Garden, it would have been a powerful temptation.

Jesus knew what was at stake. He passed this trial, too. His reply emphasized that God *expects* trust from us, because he said so. You may have noticed, when Jesus quoted this last scripture, he began it by saying, "It is said," instead of "It is written." Commentators make a big deal out of this, but it seems to me pretty simple. Jesus is quoting scripture, but he's quoting words spoken by God, and then written down. You could almost read his response to the Tempter this way: "God says, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" That's a statement of trust, folks; and it's a statement that defeats the Tempter. Jesus wasn't worried about how he would get down from there; he knew

God would take care of him. And he knew that God would be glad to hear this proclamation of trust. *That's* the right relationship to have with God – and a relationship that the Tempter was trying to destroy. Jesus trusted God – all the way to the cross, and the tomb. He knew that what God promised would happen on the third day, would happen. And so it did. By passing this final test, by refusing to give in to this powerful temptation, Jesus prepared himself for the road to Golgotha – and our salvation.

Now – ending sermons can be difficult at times. But sometimes, Scripture provides an ending for you, a message and maybe a warning you can take with you and use in the week ahead. This passage provides us with just such an ending. Here's the last verse of our passage for today: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." The original language would be better translated, "until the *appointed time*." Do you remember when that "appointed time" was? In the most intimate setting, at the Last Supper with his disciples, the devil would enter *Judas Iscariot*, NOT Jesus! – and begin the final testing of our Lord.

I hate to say it, but we're in a situation not-too-different from Judas'. I'm sure Judas felt pretty comfortable there, with his little "church family" of Twelve. Temptations hit us when we least expect them, when our guards are down and our defenses are relaxed and we're comfortable. We get tested in our faith by the many things that happen in the world, and our trust in God gets tested by the many things that happen to *us*. But we have an answer for temptation and testing. Just as Jesus did, we can fall back on God to help us; and we can place *our* fate, our very lives, in the hands of God.

You know why? Because just like Jesus, and then just like the disciples, WE have a mission, a ministry, to do for God. You and I might just have to come face to face with the things that draw us away from God, the things that mess up or even destroy our relationship with God. We'll certainly have to deal with the things that keep us, or TRY to keep us, from doing the things God wants us to do, God needs us to do. Lent is a good time to stop and reflect, pause and take stock, of yourself and your God. What gets in the way of doing what God wants you to do? What gets between you and God? Those are the things to give up for Lent; and not just for Lent, but for eternity.