

## **Trials and Temptations**

### **Luke 4:1-13**

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 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.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Jesus answered him,

"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

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.

You, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.'"

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, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him,

"It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

## **Trials and Temptations**

Luke 4:1-13

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### **I.**

This morning, here on the first Sunday of the Lenten season, I feel that it is important to provide you with the grain of salt right up front before you take what I am about to give you. You are probably going to need it, and be glad to have it by the time the “Amen” comes around (and it will, it always does, just a matter of getting there). Though we’ll have to see where the sermon eventually takes us, it seems the time has come (once more) to deal honestly with things as they are.

First, though, the salt. Save for the fact that it is sugaring season, with sap running, evaporators boiling, and pancakes being prepared, this is a brutal time of year for folks like us here in the north country. We have had the full dose of winter, and while we might see the light at the end of the tunnel, at this point it only serves to deepen the darkness. That I have been in a bit of a “funk” the past couple of weeks would be an understatement (just ask my wife, Linda).

### **II.**

I have come *by* it honestly, though, so I am trying to honest *about* it. I am tired of not being able to do the things which I like to do, which usually involve water that is liquid rather than rock hard, breezes which are warm and gentle rather than harsh and biting, and footing which is sure and true rather than slick and treacherous. To make matters worse, the morose and penitential season of Lent is upon us which, to me anyway, often feels like a boot upon the neck.

Perhaps I am being overly dramatic (*NO?!?*) but all this is to say that I am tempted to be a little *too* forthright with you today. We shall see, however, as it is still early days as far as this sermon is concerned. I might very well chicken out and take the easy off-ramp. Best to just set out, keep going, and see where the journey takes us.

### **III.**

Turning to today's text from Luke 4, the story of Jesus' temptation, we find three spiritual guardrails: that one does not live by bread alone, that we are to worship and serve only God, and that we are not to put God to the test. Rather than individually examining each of these three admonishments, I would like to suggest we consider them *in their totality* as the means to right relationship *with*, and orientation *to* God.

First, though, let us enlarge the frame. In the first chapter of Luke's Gospel the birth of John the Baptist is foretold. The second chapter recounts the birth of Jesus. Chapter three finds John the Baptist preparing the way for the Messiah's arrival, then, Jesus is himself baptized with heaven opening and the Holy Spirit descending on him in bodily form like a dove; with a voice from heaven being heard to say: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Immediately, at the start of chapter four, Jesus, now freshly *full of the Holy Spirit*, returns from the Jordan and is led *by* that Spirit into the wilderness.

#### **IV.**

Though the story of Jesus going toe-to-toe with the devil is often seen as a nod to his *divinity*, what is actually being stressed throughout each of these first four chapters is Jesus' *humanity*; with the nature of the relationship between the two becoming the fundamental question which would fully define his first followers and greatly occupy the early church. Whereas the liturgical season of Lent, in its earliest forms and as we know it today, is most commonly understood as setting an unattainable goal adherents to the faith are to strive for nevertheless, the real lesson Lent has to teach us is the veracity of Jesus' humanity.

Lent is not about striving to emulate Jesus' suffering, it is a reminder that Jesus was just like us. While the story would, no doubt, be much more impressive if Jesus demonstrated his *divinity*, Jesus goes to extreme lengths to, instead, demonstrate his *humanity*; and the need to keep right the relationship between one's humanity and one's Creator.

## V.

Rather than turning stone into bread, Jesus acknowledges that as the crown of creation, we need not allow ourselves to be ruled by bestial needs or wanton desires. The attainment of “bread” alone, either literal or symbolic, is not our chief end, nor is it the pursuit of greatest urgency. On the contrary, Jesus’ response to the devil underscores a quiet contentment to live within the limits of life, regardless of one’s particular ratio of bread to stone, and a positive affirmation of the bounds inherent in our creatureliness. Any self-denial at work in Jesus, is a denial of the all too common human tendency to confuse “want” with “need.”

## VI.

In response to the Faustian bargain offered by the devil to give false worship in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus affirms the truth of our existence: we owe all we have, and all we are, to the One who called us into being from across both time and space, imbuing us with an intrinsic purpose and an innate value by simple virtue of having been birthed of God.

As such, we are to worship and serve *only* God, as it is our relationship as creature to Creator which, first and finally, not only *defines* us but is more than sufficient to *delight* us. Above all else, the act of worship is a sign of one’s gratitude, and an acknowledgement of one’s bounty; even, and especially, in the midst of whatever we may perceive as the weight of our loss or lack. Such “right” worship reveals the wisdom which arises from a proper understanding of who we are, from whence we have come, and to which we shall most assuredly go.

## VII.

Having stood firm and confident within the limits of his humanity, and having upheld the rightness of relationship with God, Jesus’ final temptation is that of zeal and self-importance. As one might teeter on the pinnacle of the temple, each day’s journey through this world is always a precarious balancing act. Those who realize as much tend to walk softly regardless of how big a stick they may carry by virtue of their status as the children of God; even Jesus, with a heavenly voice still singing sweetly in his ear that said, “you are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

When we put God to the test, we forget the directionality of our relationship with God: God does not exist for our benefit, but we for God's. The true mark of understanding that one is a daughter or son of God, is to walk with humility and gentleness upon this earth.

## **VIII.**

Finally, seeing that Jesus would not succumb to the temptations set before him, we are told that the devil departed from him until "an opportune time"; which is a very curious statement, indeed. Frankly, one can hardly imagine a context which is *more* opportune than this one: alone, vulnerable, and weakened in body. Certainly the devil's sentiment may be a harbinger of the trial to come in the Garden of Gethsemane when, later in Luke's Gospel, we read, "And being in anguish, Jesus prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground," or foreshadows the moment from Matthew 27 when, dying on the cross, Jesus utters, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

While this may be a convenient explanation, and certainly within the realm of possibility, perhaps a more obvious explanation is that each new moment is an opportunity for trial and tempting. Oh, not every time or all the time but certainly at *any* time. It is not a matter of *if* it will happen but, rather, *when* it will happen...to *us*.

## **IX.**

Now for the forthrightness. While the great majority of our life together in the church is, or certainly *could* and *should* be, about the joys of living, such as babies being born; the love of parents in making a home and raising a family; kids growing up, discovering themselves, and venturing out; the realization of, and gratitude for the blessings of our lives; the generosity of sharing our time, energy, and resources with each other; the care for, and abidance of those who have less than we do; the friendships we find here in this family of faith we foster; the fruits of laboring along side one another in common purpose and shared burden; the laughter and lightness that permeates our days; the worship that revives, renews, and reorients us; the feasting and celebration that often abound; the opportunity to sing and lift our voices together in harmonious hope; and, the privilege of being a beacon of light in the community, our life together is also about the trials and temptations we face and how we face them.

## **X.**

Though I hardly needed it, this past week I was reminded *once again* of how much trial and temptation is a persistent and pervasive part of our life together as a church. Less a whine or wail, these trials and temptations of ours are more a steady bass line which rumbles low and slow mostly unnoticed which, nevertheless, sets a rhythm to both the days of our delight as well as the nights of our dying.

One of the irrefutable truths of our life together as a church is that there is *always* suffering of body and soul, trial by tribulation, and the temptation to despair occurring in the life of those here in our midst. Oh, not to all of us all the time (mercifully) but certainly to *some* of us at any given moment, with each of us taking our turn eventually and unavoidably. It is not a question of *if* but, rather, simply a matter of time. We all know, at some level, our turn will come; or, come once again.

## **XI.**

I really don't want to talk about all *that* today, though. I simply do not have the strength for it, particularly in these waning days of winter. What I *would* like to ask us to do, however, is simply recognize that *that* is there. All the time, and without exception; and to walk through the world with such an honest awareness.

To be perfectly frank with you today, the story of Christ's temptation is a bit of a head-scratcher to me. Unlike the Transfiguration, clearly there were no witnesses to these events. Did Jesus relate the experience to a disciple who then wrote it down? Highly unlikely. While nothing less than the inspired word of God this story is obviously conspired, but with virtuous purpose: to make a Christological statement on what Christ's humanity means for his divinity. However, as a pastor, I am much more interested in what Christ's divinity means for *our* humanity; particularly as we navigate the trials and temptations of our lives, and our life together.

## **XII.**

The days are coming, and will soon be here, when we, too, will be tested by trial and temptation to accept the limits placed upon us by our humanity so that we may still walk with humility and gentleness through all that might confound us in this world. To live, and to die, secure in the belief of our innate value in having been birthed as a child of God. To serve God not just in a way which defines us but, moreover, in a way which delights us as well. And to treat others, as well as ourselves, with a depth of gratitude that arises from knowing that we owe all we have, and all we are, to the One who calls us into purposeful existence.

Lent is upon us, brothers and sisters. It is an opportune time to deal honestly with things as they are. Amen.