

“Do Not Put the Lord Your God to the Test”

Luke 4:1-13

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First Sunday in Lent

We have before us a marvelous passage: the temptation of Christ. This story takes us back to the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry; chronologically it occurs just after his baptism in the Jordan River, and prior to the beginning of his ministry in the towns around the Sea of Galilee. We read it today, on the first Sunday in Lent, to remind us of a key theme of this season, namely, *the temptation to sin*.

“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.” Mark and Matthew tell us pretty much the same thing. Jesus, forty days, in the wilderness, *alone*, with no people around. Just the Holy Spirit ... and the devil, who is mentioned about 100 times in the Bible, and is often called by the name *Satan*.

Now immediately we are outside some people’s comfort zones. Some Christians don’t believe there is such a thing as a devil. If we are talking about the image of the devil that has made its way into popular imagination – a red-skinned being with horns and hoofs and a pitchfork – I would certainly agree. That image of the devil didn’t exist before about the 11th century. In earlier Christian art the devil was depicted as black – starting in the 9th century – and before that as a blue or violet angel. There is, in fact, no physical description of the devil in the Bible, although it appears in the form of a serpent in the book of Genesis, and in the form of a dragon in the book of Revelation. We need to get the image of the red-skinned being with horns and hoofs a pitchfork out of our heads; that image is really not biblical.

How does the Presbyterian Church understand the devil? There are a number of references to “the devil” or “Satan” in our church’s Constitution, in the confessional statements from earlier in our history. The Second Helvetic Confession quotes what Jesus says about the devil in John’s gospel: the devil “was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). The confession goes on to say that some angels “fell of their own free will and were cast into destruction, becoming enemies of all good and of the faithful.” The Westminster Confession of Faith describes how “our first parents, being seduced by the subtilty and temptation of Satan, sinned in eating the forbidden fruit.” This resulted in our “bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin.” All our transgressions proceed from this inclination to evil. Part of our calling as Christians is to resist “the suggestions of Satan.” The Westminster Catechisms elaborate that every time we pray “Thy kingdom come,” we are praying “that Satan’s kingdom may be destroyed, and that the Kingdom of grace may be advanced;” and that every time we pray “and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” we are acknowledging “that Satan, the world, and the flesh, are ready powerfully to draw us aside and

ensnare us,” and we are praying “that God would so overrule the world and all in it, subdue the flesh, and restrain Satan” so that we might “be kept from being tempted to sin; or, if tempted, that by his Spirit we may be powerfully supported and enabled to stand in the hour of temptation; or, when fallen, raised again and recovered out of it; ... that our sanctification and salvation may be perfected, Satan trodden under our feet, and we fully freed from sin, temptation, and all evil forever.” Our Presbyterian heritage affirms that there *is* such a thing as “Satan” or “the devil,” namely, a fallen angel who wreaked havoc in God’s creation, caused humanity to stray from God’s intended path, continues to tempt us to this very day, can be resisted through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, and will ultimately be defeated by God. That’s pretty much the same thing that all the major Christian traditions have had to say about Satan, and it’s all well attested in various passages in both the Old and New Testaments.

The problem is, for whatever reason, a lot of Christians have some trouble swallowing all that, or seem to think that we have somehow moved *beyond* it all. But look around; we have certainly not moved beyond the reality of human sinfulness. Murder, greed, lying, lust, adultery, abuse, stealing – where did these things come from? Did *God* put it in our hearts to do such things as these, and others like them? Certainly not! Those of you who don’t want to believe that Satan is, in some sense, real, I challenge you to come up with a better explanation for the reality of human sinfulness. Our propensity to sin, and those temptations that we struggle with – they came from *somewhere*. Our scriptures and tradition tell us where. They also tell us what God has done, is doing, and will do to *solve* the problem.

The key is Jesus. The central pivot in God’s entire plan for the salvation of humanity is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus *accomplished* certain things that we could never accomplish on our own. The defeat of sin and evil begins with the coming of Christ into the world. This was why Satan perceived him as a threat. This is why, as soon as Jesus received the Holy Spirit, Satan came after him in force. This is why Satan spent 40 days throwing absolutely *everything he had* at Jesus.

Luke and Matthew tell us of three specific temptations that Jesus experienced. These three would not have occupied the whole span of forty days; indeed, all of them could have easily occurred on the same day. We are only given a small fraction of all that Jesus experienced in the wilderness; these were the three temptations that Jesus told some of his disciples about, or that were divinely revealed to them. We have no idea what else Jesus endured; I believe Jesus experienced every form of temptation any of us have ever experienced, and probably more. We just get to hear about three of them.

The first: “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus could have done that if he wanted to. He turned water into wine, healed countless people of various illnesses, and even brought Lazarus back to life. The question was not *whether* Jesus *could* do this. The question was *whether* he *would* do it, under such circumstances. The devil is simply trying to test him; there is nothing *redemptive* about this miracle that Jesus chose not to perform. It might have sated Jesus’ hunger, but he was in a contest of wills here. His job was to do what no human had ever been able to do: *resist the devil at every turn*. He could not accomplish his purpose if he caved to the devil’s will. So the answer had to be no. Jesus quotes scripture: “One does not live by bread alone.” That’s from the book of Deuteronomy. There are *other* kinds of sustenance we need in addition to the food that we eat; one of them is the Word of God. There are *plenty* of verses in scripture that can provide you with spiritual strength to help *you* resist temptation, when it comes knocking on your door.

The second temptation: “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. If you, then will worship me, it will all be yours.”
What do you want, Jesus? Do you want *power*? Do you want *authority*? Do you want to *rule the world*? Some people do, of course. We’re seeing a version of that play out right now in Ukraine. But what does Satan mean when he says that “all this authority ... has been given over to me”? *Who’s in charge here*?

Well, *God* is ultimately the one in charge. But, as I was explaining earlier, Satan has set up a kingdom on earth. Sin exercises dominion here. There is a spiritual stronghold of evil here that touches *everyone*. Satan does have a significant amount of authority in this world. He’s willing to share some of that authority with Jesus – if Jesus will bow down and worship him. If Jesus were to do that, he would be saying that of the two of them, *Satan* is the greater one, the one more worthy of praise. But Jesus is not interested in glory and authority; he is interested in faithfully carrying out his mission. So he quotes from Deuteronomy again: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” The irony is that, through his faithfulness, Jesus will ultimately be given *all* authority on earth, and also in heaven – by *God*.

The third temptation, and the last one we know about: Satan takes Jesus to Jerusalem and places him on the highest point of the great Jewish temple, which was probably the high southeast corner, towering hundreds of feet over the Kidron Valley below. Satan says to Jesus, “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.’” Now the devil is quoting scripture at Jesus; Psalm 91, which we read earlier. As Shakespeare said, “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.” Be careful; sometimes people take things that are in the scriptures and twist them for unholy purposes. But Jesus doesn’t fall for this trick; he quotes Deuteronomy one more time: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Jesus not only rejects the temptation, but also basically says, “I’m not just the Son of God. I’m also the Lord God incarnate.”

That’s all we know about. Luke says, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” Later in the Gospel, Luke says “Satan entered into Judas Iscariot,” one of Jesus’ twelve hand-picked disciples. That sets in motion the final sequence of events that will lead to Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion and death – and, ironically, the defeat of both sin and evil, when God raises Jesus from the dead. Satan’s actions against Jesus ultimately are what lead to Satan’s undoing.

It took one who knew no sin to defeat the power of sin. Jesus, alone of all who have walked this earth, remained sinless from birth to death. Nobody else has ever done that; nobody else ever *will* do it. But we, too, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, when we come to faith in Christ. The righteousness of Jesus gets imparted to us when we place our trust in him. We receive a new calling: to set aside our former way of life, to turn from the ways of sin, to develop the capacity to say “no” when temptation comes our way. Jesus invites us to a *holy* life, regardless of how *unholy* it might ever have been. This is not necessarily a linear journey; every Christian I know stumbles periodically along the way. But the New Testament makes it clear that this is the expectation for Christians: to *grow in holiness*. “Sanctification” is the fancy term. This requires a lot of awareness, a lot of perseverance, a lot of prayer.

The season of Lent is a good time to renew our commitment. Wherever you are in your journey towards holiness, no matter how far you may have strayed in the past, *today* is a great day to turn back toward Jesus, back towards the one who knew no sin, who beckons us to follow him. Let us learn from the model he provides; let us strengthen our resolve to say “no” whenever the tempter comes knocking.

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