

“Tested by the Devil”

Luke 4:1-13

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First Sunday in Lent

We’re going to talk about *temptation* today! But first, let’s talk about Lent. The season of the church year that began this past Wednesday and that will continue until the day before Easter Sunday. Our word “Lent” comes from an Old English word for *springtime*. The season of Lent and the season of spring always overlap to some extent, and the official start of spring *always* occurs during Lent.

Lent is a period of 40 days. If you count the days from Ash Wednesday to Easter, you get 46, not 40. What’s up with that? We don’t count the Sundays. We only count the other six days of the week. Why? Because Lent is a time for us to prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ – which is something we do, to some extent, on *every* Sunday of the year. So today is technically the first Sunday *in* Lent, not the first Sunday *of* Lent. Yesterday was the *fourth* day of Lent, and the fifth will be *tomorrow*.

Someone asked me this week if Ash Wednesday is in the Bible. No, it’s not, and neither is Lent. The word “ash” shows up dozens of times, and “repenting in sackcloth and ashes” is mentioned twice. Fasting, which many people do during Lent, also shows up dozens of times, and there are three instances in the Bible when people fast for forty days. One was Moses, who was on Mount Sinai “with the Lord forty days and forty nights,” and “he neither ate bread nor drank water” during that whole time (Exodus 34:28). Another was Elijah, who appears to have fasted during the 40 days it took him to reach Mount Sinai; the text says that he “ate and drank; then he went *in the strength of that food* forty days and forty nights” (1 Kings 19:8). And the third was Jesus, in the Gospel story you heard today, and its parallels in Matthew and Mark. Luke says “he ate nothing at all during those days” (Luke 4:2). So some of the basic *concepts* that are associated with Lent – fasting, ashes as a sign of repentance, and the forty-day period – are definitely present in the Bible, even if a season called “Lent” is not. Still, it’s a very old Christian practice; Christians were observing a special 40-day period of fasting and prayer leading up to Easter by at least the fourth century (1600 years ago!). In time it acquired the name “Lent,” or “Spring.”

So what can or should we *do* during the season of Lent? Great question, and I’ll come back to that in a few minutes. For now, let’s turn to what *Jesus* did during *his* forty days of prayer and fasting.

Luke’s version of the story, like Matthew’s, identifies three specific temptations that Jesus faced: (1) “The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread’ (Luke 4:3); (2) “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 all this authority and their glory, 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’”; and (3) “Then the devil led him to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.’ The devil even quotes Psalm 91 to try to entice Jesus.

Jesus says “no” to all three. He doesn’t need to turn stones into bread, because what nourishes him is the Word of God. He doesn’t need worldly power and might, for the way his kingdom works is not by ruling the world, but rather by the Holy Spirit working in people’s hearts. And he doesn’t need to test God’s promises by performing a reckless act and expecting God to save him, because he knows that God’s promises need no test. The devil wants Jesus to worship him, to *submit* to him, and Jesus says *no*.

Those are only three temptations that are named. They would not have taken forty days, at least not the way they are narrated here. I suspect there were many, *many* other temptations that Jesus experienced during those forty days, which did not get written down. In fact, I’m inclined to think that Jesus experienced *every temptation that any of us have ever faced* during that forty-day period. The three that are named are just *examples* of the testing which Jesus experienced – and which he overcame.

Note that, in all three cases, Jesus uses *scripture* to stand firm against the devil’s will. He says “no” to the first temptation by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3; “no” to the second by quoting Deuteronomy 6:13; and “no” to the third by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. Jesus knew his Bible, and he uses it *well*.

But *the devil also knows the scriptures*. He quotes from Psalm 91 when he is trying to bend Jesus to his will. As Shakespeare put it, “The devil can cite scripture for his purpose.” Just because something is in the Bible doesn’t mean it can be applied intent to harm. Holy words in the mouth of an unholy person can lead to unholy results. Examples abound. Some people have used the Bible to justify the institution of slavery and declare it to be “ordained by God.” Some have used the Bible to justify the wholesale slaughter of large groups of people. Some have used the Bible – and continue to use the Bible – to justify seizing land that other people are rightfully living on. I could go on; we can all come up with examples of holy scripture being used in unholy ways. “The devil can cite scripture for his purpose.”

So just *knowing what the Bible says* isn’t good enough. We’ve got to learn how to *apply* it. We’ve got to put it in context. We’ve got to seek to discern God’s will for the here and now, which might *or might not* be the same as what God’s will was *there and then*. We’ve got to use the Bible as a *tool*, not as a *bludgeon*. In other words, we’ve got to be *careful*. Because the devil can cite scripture for his purpose.

And who is this devil? Who – or what – is this spiritual entity strong enough to *torment Jesus Christ for forty whole days*? I could give you a history lesson about how the devil has been understood and described over time. But that would be beside the point. Who – or what – is the devil *for us*?

Let me tell you what I think. We can all agree that there’s *evil* in this world, right? That people sometimes do things that are *very, very bad*? That list is *very long*. All those times when people twist love into hate, truth into lies, generosity into greed, respect into ridicule. When people call evil “good.” We can also look back at our *own* lives and pinpoint some things that *we* have done that were wrong, that Jesus would not approve of. Right? Well, what *motivates* us to do those things? What *impulses* are at play? And where do those impulses *come from*? From *God*? Of course not! The God we know through Jesus Christ is a God who is wholly committed to *good*. Evil impulses do *not* come from God.

Something went wrong. Something entered into this world, this universe, that was not *of God*. There is a *force* that tormented Jesus, and that torments *us*, and that torments *our whole world*. And it doesn’t impact just us *humans*. Sometimes, it impacts *nature itself*. Earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes – forces of *destruction* that often result in deaths of humans and animals. Did God *intend* all that? I don’t believe so. What about *suffering*? Why do people experience so much *pain*? Why is there *cancer*?

Also: where do the *thoughts* come from that don't do us any good? The voices in our heads that can say, "you're worthless," or you're a loser," or "nobody cares about you," or "you should just give up"? Those thoughts *do not* come from God. *God* says: you are *treasured*, you are *valued*, you are *loved*.

There's a force out there, some kind of power that is set against God, and against God's creation. There is a *root of all evil*, and it's not in God. *Something else is at work*. Something that causes people to think or to do *very bad* things. Sometimes it causes *us* to think or to do very bad things. That doesn't give us an excuse – "the devil made me do it!" – because we *allow* ourselves to succumb to temptation, to commit those transgressions. There are always moments when we have an opportunity to say *no*, *I am NOT going to allow myself to do that*, no matter how tempted we may feel, how much we feel *pulled* in that direction. There are always opportunities for us to look the devil in the eye and say: *HELL NO!* Let me tell you, if our world has a *prayer*, it's going to be because more people learn how to say *HELL NO*.

You see, you don't have to believe in some red demonic figure with horns and a pitchfork and a tail. I don't. That image is helpful for *some* people. It's not helpful for others. Just like the image of God as an old white man with a big beard – that image is helpful for some people. It's not helpful for others. You don't have to believe that the devil is a *being*. But I do think we need to believe that it's *real*.

Which brings us back to the temptation story, and what Jesus experienced those forty days. And it brings us back to this season of Lent. We are given an opportunity to spend forty days "in the wilderness," so to speak, like Jesus did. We are given an opportunity to engage in a greater amount of *self-discipline* than we might ordinarily engage in. We are given an opportunity to really focus and practice saying *NO* to the devil. What *tempts* us? What really, sincerely, tries to *pull* us away from *God*?

Some people "give up something" during Lent, like candy, or meat, or video games, or social media. That's okay, but it kind of misses the point. If you give something up for forty days and then go right back to it the other 325 days of the year, what have you gained? Does it help you *get closer to God*? Does it help you *grow* in your walk of faith? Or do you just wait – impatiently! – for the forty days to be *over*? When an alcoholic wants to give up drinking, they can't stop at 40 days. They have to reach 60. Then 90. Then a *fourth* month, and a *fifth* and a *sixth* and eventually a *year*. They have to *keep going*. If something in your life is worth giving up, *it's worth giving up forever*, not just for 40 days. I remember the day, years ago, when I bought my last bottle of Sprite. I said to myself, "This is going to be your last one," and I *meant* it, and I *kept* it. If you really want to give something up, *then give it up for good*.

So what, then, should we do during Lent? Well, let's think about it another way. The word "Lent," remember, means "Spring." It's the season that comes between *winter* and *summer*. From those bleak days with not enough warmth and not enough sunshine, with bare trees and empty gardens, to a *flourishing* of warmth, light, growth, and new birth, with all the sights and sounds and smells that come with the springtime. It's a season of *transition*. It's a season for *renewal*. It's a time for *something new*.

So, I invite you to reflect on your life. Where is your life feeling *bleak* or *barren* or *empty*? What in your life needs more *warmth* and *light* and *growth*? What needs to *blossom* within you? What can you *cultivate* during this season of Lent, this spiritual springtime, that would make you *brighter*, more *radiant*, closer to your *authentic* self that God had in mind? What *one thing* could you focus on in your inward life, for six weeks, that needs to *be born* within you? *That's* what you should do during Lent.

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