

# What Tempts You?

## Luke 4:1-13

As we begin this season of Lent and our journey with Jesus to Easter, we explore our scripture and the question: what tempts you. We have heard the temptations and tests that Jesus experienced and we can learn to deal with our own challenges. But first we have to admit the issues that cause us to stumble. What is it for you? Is it food like it was for Esau who sold his right as the firstborn of Isaac for a meal of lentil stew? He could not think of tomorrow or the next day or the future...his immediate desire for food was the only thing that mattered at the time! Is it water? The need for water is a basic one...a man in one of Jesus' stories would have given anything for a drop of water as he suffered in the afterlife. Is it shelter? I have a friend in Southern California who tells me that housing prices are so high she fears the only way they will be homeowners is for them to inherit a house and she and her husband are not in a hurry to give up their home. Is it money? But Jesus told us the love our money will only bring evil in our lives. Is your temptation relationships or love? In our society, where we try to find love on our own, we can get ourselves into trouble. Even in ancient times Jesus met the woman at the well, who had married five times and was in an uncommitted relationship...she was looking for love in all the wrong places. Is your temptation or testing recognition of others? How often do we get in trouble because we want to be seen as more important, more talented, more beautiful...each of us can fill in the blank? Some of get ourselves in trouble because we want God to miraculously reverse the consequences of our poor decisions.

The nature of evil, the nature of Christ, the power of temptation: each of these ideas has been named, over time, as a possible theme for our scripture. The first two verses tell us: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." Jesus was in relationship to the Spirit, evil was personified as the devil, and temptation lasted for forty days.

Lori Hale tells the story of her gregarious middle son—just shy of four years old—encountered this text during a Lenten children's church, he learned something about temptation. She did not accompany him to children's worship, but stayed in the main worship service. The congregational leader who led the children that day was a very dynamic speaker and storyteller, so Lori was not surprised when her son pulled her aside later that day to ask her some questions. "Hey, mom," he started, "what do you know about the devil?" Her mind immediately jumped to a spectrum of theological views and doctrine. Should she start with Augustine? Should she couch her answer in general terms of conservative and progressive or liberal interpretations of the text? Was he ready for process theology? Then she looked at him again and remembered that he was three, almost four.

"What do *you* know about the devil?" she asked in classic mom/professor mode. His response was instructive.

"Well," he began, "the devil talked to Jesus." Good, she thought. He was paying attention. "The devil was mean," he continued. *Mean*. I began to wonder about the relationship of "mean" to "evil." What is the difference between "mean" and "evil"? Was the devil really mean? Perhaps it is possible to be mean without being evil, but is the opposite true? Is it possible to be evil without being mean? Or did the beloved children's leader decide that her young audience could

understand "mean" in ways they could not understand evil, so that her questions had little importance relative to the children's sermon?

She wonderings were cut short as her son continued his hand-me-down exposition of the text. Leaning closer to her and dropping his voice to a loud whisper, he said, "if we were at a store, and you and Dad were in one aisle, and I was in another aisle, and"—his hushed tones became downright conspiratorial at this point—"there was candy..." He paused for effect. "The devil would say, 'You should take some!'"

She was not sure what was most startling in this retelling of the story by her son: that he could, in fact, retell it—especially in such dramatic fashion—or that the version he had learned placed such heavy emphasis on the temptation and the tempter. In line with theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, she took her cues for reading this story from verse 8, in which Jesus quotes a passage from Deuteronomy: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." It is a demanding passage, but Jesus quoted it and abided by it, knowing that the very meaning and shape of his role as Messiah were at stake.

With Bonhoeffer in mind, Lori started to respond to her statement with a message about Jesus' obedience to God. She thought about telling him that the story was more about the responses Jesus gave to the temptations than to the temptations themselves. Jesus' responses underscored his faithfulness to God, setting the stage for the whole of his ministry and, ultimately, his sacrifice. His responses come with the full knowledge that obedience to God will bring persecution, misunderstanding, and the cross. Many followers of Jesus wanted him to free Israel, to restore an earthly kingdom marked by honor and glory. To say yes to the world would have required Jesus to say no to God, to the way of God, and to an idea of God's kingdom that those followers simply did not

understand. It would have required him to say no to the freedom and love for humanity that were and are the marks of his death and resurrection.

Then it occurred to Lori. Maybe her little boy—who had already taken in so much—understood these very points about the story. So she asked him. "Honey, if we were at a store, and Dad and I were in one aisle, and you were in another aisle, and there was candy, and the devil said, 'You should take some!' What would you say back to the devil?"

A genuinely sweet grin lit up his entire face and without hesitation he replied, "Oh! I would say thank you!"

It is not surprising that a three-year-old missed the point, but lots of us miss the same point all the time. It is far easier than not for us to say, "Thank you," when temptation comes calling; however, the story is only partly about temptation. Today's text is also about Jesus' choice—and ours—to be obedient to God. **Lori Brandt Hale**

In this season of Lent we are invited to embrace an intentional way of life. For the forty days of Lent (not including Sundays), we follow the example of Jesus who was "led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil" (vv. 1-2). The Spirit does not just "drop him off" in the wilderness to fend for himself; the Spirit continues to abide with him, enabling him to grow stronger through that season. The Spirit's anointing of Jesus in baptism and his faithfulness to God amid testing constituted Jesus' preparation for his mission. Being chosen and anointed was not sufficient preparation either for our ministry gathered or for our ministry scattered. We must be tested, often by being led to places of hunger and despair. Only then do we learn dependence on God, who graciously provides for all of our needs in all of life's seasons.

A popular notion of the season of Lent is that we must "give up something." We are often asked, "What are you giving up for Lent?" Various responses are

expected: red meat, sweets, or perhaps excess television or Internet browsing. Perhaps we need to give up that simplistic notion of Lent. Reflecting on some implications of Lent, liturgical scholars Hickman, Saliers, Stookey, and White write: "Lent is thus not giving up something but rather taking upon ourselves the intention and the receptivity to God's grace so that we may worthily participate in the mystery of God-with-us." "Intentionality" and "receptivity to God's grace" are two things to take upon ourselves during Lent.

Intentionality in repentance, fellowship, prayer, fasting, Scripture meditation, acts of piety, acts of justice, and concentrating on our baptismal covenant are examples of things to "take upon ourselves." By taking on "intentionality" and "receptivity to God's grace" during Lent, we gain the spiritual depth to be faithful to "the mystery of God-with-us" even in our unexpected trials and temptations. Jesus did not ask for trials and temptations; he accepted that they could not be avoided if he would do God's will. Jesus' season of testing was not for a day or two; his season of forty days of temptation suggests to us that we may have faithfully to endure seasons of long and protracted difficulty. Jesus did not have just one encounter of diabolical testing; he overcame multiple temptations. His temptations were real and riveting.

Would Jesus exploit his status and power before God as the Son of God to satisfy his own needs and desires? Would Jesus compromise his relationship with God by failing to acknowledge the ultimate sovereignty of God over all things? Would Jesus accept the bait of Satan, who interpreted the Scriptures outside of intimate knowledge of the ways of God? Jesus' intentionality and receptivity to God's grace show us the way to turn toward God, rather than away from God, during our trials and temptations. If we choose the Lenten struggle to be intentional and receptive to the grace of God, we will encounter a faithful

God who leads us not only into the wilderness but also through the wilderness.

**Jeffery L. Tribble Sr.**

The one who was tempted in the wilderness is also the crucified and resurrected one, in whom God's new life is made available to those who cannot, by their own resources, withstand temptation. The one who was tempted in the wilderness thus strengthens us in our weakness. **Kimberly M. Van Driel**

No matter what your temptations; seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and the things you need will be given to you – and they will be better than you can imagine. The Holy Spirit will give you the true desires of your heart.

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