

The Temptation of Jesus

^{NRS} **Luke 4:1** Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,² 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.³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.⁶ 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.⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"⁹ 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,¹⁰ for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'¹¹ and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

^{NRS} **Matthew 4:1** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor;⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

^{NRS} **Mark 1:12** And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

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This morning we'll pick up where we left off last week. Mark's gospel tells us that immediately after his baptism, Jesus was driven out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. He was there for forty days and was tempted by Satan. Matthew and Luke go into much more detail about the temptation of Jesus, even though they don't have the three temptations in the same order. John makes no mention of the temptation of Jesus, and writes as if it never took place. As I looked at the three texts, I was struck by something. None of them say that Jesus was alone in the wilderness. But that's what we have always assumed. Some have wondered how we came to know about the temptation, reasoning that there was no one there but Jesus and Satan, but the story is told from the standpoint of an observer, not by Jesus telling the story in the first person. Frankly, it's a detail that doesn't have anything to do with the point of the story.

So, we have two characters in this story, Jesus and Satan. Mark talks about Satan, the adversary. Matthew and Luke usually use a different word, devil, which means slanderer or accuser. Let's think about Satan for a moment. Satan doesn't appear much in the Old Testament. That name never appears in the creation story – it just says serpent. And nowhere do we get the popular image of the devil as a red being with horns and a barbed tail, carrying a pitchfork. There are some other images of Satan.

C.S. Lewis, who wrote the *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Mere Christianity*, also wrote a small book titled, *The Screwtape Letters* which he dedicated to his good friend J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. *The Screwtape Letters* is a series of letters from a high ranking devil named Screwtape written to his nephew, a novice devil-in-training, named Wormwood. In the early days of our marriage, I remember

Cathy and Bill, piled up together on the bed, reading *The Screwtape Letters* to each other. I've asked Bill, if now, about thirty years later, he would read an excerpt from one of the letters.

In his book, C.S. Lewis has created a whole society and hierarchy of devils and arranged them in a bureaucracy. The training that is given to young Wormwood is notable for its subtlety and innuendo. Nothing is brazenly evil, all is subtle corruption. While the whole society of devils that C.S. Lewis presents is farfetched, his description of the technique of temptation rings true. Many people have some difficulty with the personification of evil as a horned devil, or the evil bureaucracy of Lewis. We should keep in mind that the physical appearance, the organization, or even the physical existence of devils is not the important issue. Let me be clear. Evil exists. There are evil forces at work in this world – but whether evil is a physical being, or a whole society of beings, or the anti-loving and immoral forces themselves matters very little. In fact, if you'll allow me to butcher the English language a bit, when we “literalize” Satan, we tend to trivialize evil at the same time. We transfer evil from some unclean source in our own hearts and put it on some other being that's doing something to us. By making evil an “other,” we try to reduce our involvement and responsibility. Flip Wilson made a comedy career out of plainly expressing what people were unconsciously thinking with his character Geraldine. In one of the funniest skits, Geraldine is tempted by the devil to buy an alluring expensive dress. She tells the devil, “Get behind me, Satan!” only to hear about how good she looks from that angle as well. She buys the dress, declaring that “The devil made me do it!” Do you see what happens? By personifying evil as some exterior being, the source of temptation is moved from inside of us to an outside independent being, over which we have no control. When we personify evil, when we “literalize” it as some horned individual, we can trivialize the situation by trying to put responsibility on the other being.

If in this text in Like, we concentrate on the figure of Satan, it becomes a sort of debate in the wilderness between two supernatural beings. Satan puts forth a proposition. Jesus offers a rebuttal and wins that round of the debate. The whole thing doesn't have much to do with us as it's just intellectual sparing between celestial non-humans - and we know that the Son of God has to be holding all of the trump cards in this game. If we only read this story as a verbal exchange between Jesus on the one hand and Satan on the other, much of the depth and power of the lesson disappears in the process.

Let's look at the text metaphorically for a moment. When we don't personify evil the message is much more personal. Jesus, newly baptized and crowned by the Holy Spirit goes out into the wilderness. He is filled with the Spirit. He's been assured of his call. It's a fearsome thing to know that you've displeased God. On the other hand, it's a great burden and responsibility to know that you have God's favor. Every decision must be made in light of that favor. You don't want to mess up. You don't want to tarnish your halo. You don't want to let God down. Keep in mind that Jesus is fully human. Don't lose sight of that in this text.

Jesus has been fasting. He's famished. He's terribly hungry. And a little idea occurs to him. All I have to do is say the word, and that rock would become a hot, fresh baked, loaf of homemade bread, crusty on the outside, tender and steaming on the inside. And his mouth begins to water. His stomach cramps with hunger pains. He feels like his belly button is gnawing on his backbone. It would be so easy to just say the word. Just say the word and your misery will go away, the demon within whispers gently.

Filled with the Spirit, Jesus can feel the power running through his veins. And the thought occurs to him that it would be easy to take over the nations of the world. Alexander the Great almost did it. Caesar Augustus almost did it. For the Son of God it would be a piece of cake. With some cunning here, some political maneuvering there, a miracle sprinkled here and there to make sure things go your way, he could get it all straightened out. Everyone would be loyal to him. Things would run so smoothly. He'd have to pull a few devilish tricks, but the ends would justify a bit of that. You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.

And how about a little bit of fun? Let's do a bungee jump off the highest tower in Jerusalem. After all, the angels will catch you. That's what scripture says. You believe the Bible don't you? Demonstrate your faith. Show how close you are to God. Think how many people it will draw, how many will believe

and be converted when they see that squadron of angels drive down and swoop you up at the last second. Pilate's never seen anything like that at the temples in Rome. Herod will roll over and beg to sit at your feet.

Jesus was tempted, sorely tempted. The easy solutions lay right at hand. The sly, soft answers to the future bubbled gently in his mind. So many things could be fixed so quickly. One could see how much better life would be.

What are your demons? What temptations slide ever so gently into your conscious thought? Only one or two more drinks and the pain will be numbed. If I just move the decimal point a tiny bit, my tax return will be less painful - and everybody does it. If I just get that new electronic toy, life will be a lot more fun. If I just put in a few more hours a week and tell my stupid boss how brilliant he is, I'll get the promotion. I love you Lord, but Sunday morning is the only time I can sleep late. I've only got a couple of bucks in my pocket this week, but I'll give generously once the kids are grown or the house is paid off. What are your temptations? What are your demons? Are you still trudging through life with the guilt of something in your past weighting you down? Is your demon whispering that the poor deserve their lot and Haiti is being punished by God?

How can we handle our demons? How can we resist our temptations? We can look and see what Jesus did. Jesus didn't have to make any new commandments to deal with his temptations. He went to scripture to find wisdom about life and his relationship with God. In fact, in this situation, his answers came from the book of Deuteronomy. We don't live by bread alone. Life isn't just about satisfying our appetites. More than caring for our body, it's important to care for the mind and to nourish the soul.

Worship the Lord and serve only God. Being a slave to position, to money, to work, to power, to the good life, to fashion, or even to family, is ultimately to be worshipping that which is less fulfilling and less permanent.

And don't put God to the test. Don't say, "Get me out of this jam, and I'll live a more faithful life." Don't expect God to prove how much we are loved by protecting us from the consequences of our risky behavior.

This is how we resist our temptations and quiet our demons. We seek the wisdom of the scriptures. We make decisions based not on easy answers and quick results, but on the good of everyone and for the benefit of the future. We can do it. Jesus did. We are called to follow in his path. Amen.