



Led by the Spirit, Tempted by the Devil

Luke 4:1-13

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Wow, what a week it's been. Last Sunday at this time I was in Phoenix, Arizona worshipping with One Church. But I could only stay overnight because an Ash Wednesday service was looming back here. Then Patti in the office reminded me that newsletter articles were due. And then I had to get a bulletin for this service ready. Saturday was crunch time to get our sermon composed, and while sitting at the computer the thought occurred to me that today was Valentine's Day.

A pastor should always seek balance professional and family matters. Yes, I was busy, but how can I neglect my partner in life? So I stepped back from the sermon and decided to put my wordsmithing skills to work composing a Valentine's poem just for her. This is what I wrote; let me know what you think. "Roses are red. Violets are blue. If I wasn't thinking of you, I'd probably be through." And that, my friends, is this sermon's nod to Valentine's Day.

Today is also the first Sunday in the season of Lent (and Lent is on the church's liturgical calendar so it takes precedence over Valentine's Day). Lent, and Easter after it, are coming early this year. But early or late we always have 40 days to make spiritual preparation for Easter. We are not talking about preparations with eggs and food coloring, or family meals, or things like that. We are talking about spiritual preparations that allow us to experience the resurrecting power of God we celebrate through Christ on Easter morning.

40 is a recurring number in the Bible when it comes to making spiritual preparation. Moses went up on Mt. Sinai and fasted 40 days in preparation for receiving the 10 Commandments engraved by the finger of God on stone tablets. The Israelites wandered 40 years in the wilderness to become a people prepared to enter the Promised Land. Now we find Jesus, all grown up, preparing for his ministry ahead like Moses, fasting for 40 days, and like Israel, making his preparations in the desert.

Our text begins just after his baptism. *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* (Verses 1-2). What's that you say? No sooner is Jesus baptized than the indwelling Holy Spirit leads him into the desert where he is tempted by the devil. Hence the title of our message on this first Sunday in Lent: "Led by the Spirit, Tempted by the

Devil.” Seems kind of incongruous to me, so let’s explore those temptations a little more closely.

He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry (Verse 2). Again, Moses fasted 40 days and so Jesus fasted 40 days. If it was good enough for Moses, and good enough for Jesus, it ought to be good enough for you. But not for me. No way. A token fast is fine for me. This is where the tradition of giving something up for Lent emerged. On Ash Wednesday evening, after the service, I was about eat some ice cream when I thought, “I should give up ice crème for Lent this year.” Didn’t happen—I missed dinner getting ready for the service and I was hungry. Imagine then how hungry Jesus was after eating nothing for 40 days.

The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread” (Verses 3-4). If Jesus can walk on water, if he can still the storm, if he can change water into wine then he can change a stone into a steaming, fresh-baked loaf of honey oatmeal bread to dip into a side of herb infused olive oil like you get at the high-end restaurants. Mmm, mmm, mmm! You know Jesus had to be tempted. But if he was, he didn’t succumb like I did with the ice crème. No, he mastered it straight away.

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone’” (Verse 4). Jesus is quoting the scriptures here—specifically from Deuteronomy where the Israelites have wandered for 40 years in the desert wilderness, and Moses is about to pass the reigns of leadership to Joshua, and he wants to impress some important things upon the memories of his people before he leaves this world and they enter the Promised Land—things they must remember if they are to survive and thrive there by God’s grace.

Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the Lord promised on oath to your forefathers. Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8:1-3).

In quoting from this passage Jesus is showing the devil that he is relying upon God to feed and sustain him in God’s time and way, just as God miraculously fed the Israelites daily manna from heaven. By mastering the devil’s temptation, Jesus is passing God’s spiritual test, and he is passing it for our benefit—as an example for us to follow. To summarize: Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert where he is tempted by the devil so that he can pass the test for our benefit. The devil tempts. God tests.

An interesting juxtaposition of these two terms—testing and tempting--is found in James brief letter. *Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted*

by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death (James 1:12-15).

The devil tempts. God tests. As the Union Pacific Railroad was being constructed, an elaborate trestle bridge was built across a large canyon in the West. Wanting to test the bridge, the builder loaded a train with enough extra cars and equipment to double its normal payload. The train was then driven to the middle of the bridge, where it stayed an entire day. One worker asked, "Are you trying to break this bridge?" "No," the builder replied, "I'm trying to prove that the bridge won't break." In the same way, the temptations Jesus faced weren't designed to see if He would break, but to prove that He couldn't.

And so it was that the devil failed to tempt Jesus to worship him and forsake God throughout those 40 days of preparation in the desert. The other two temptations are interesting in their own right and would each make fine sermons. Suffice it to say that the devil realized he was beat—at least for the time being. *When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time* (Verse 13). That opportune time came just before Jesus' arrest and sham trial and flogging and humiliation and, ultimately his crucifixion.

Jesus was sweating blood the night before it all transpired. *Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. "Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation"* (Luke 22:39-46).

As it happened Jesus did not fall into temptation and he did pass the test and he was resurrected into glory. The disciples did initially fall into temptation, but once they encountered the risen and glorified Christ they, too, found strength to master temptation and to pass the testing of their faith. All became Christian martyrs in the end, just as St. Valentine, by the way, who was martyred on February 14 according to tradition. While I am digressing, I might reclaim the proper understanding of a misappropriated term. Unlike certain religious extremists and terrorists, Christian martyrs never take their own lives and they never take the lives of other innocents. End of digression.

Unlike Jesus, everyone is at risk for succumbing to temptation in one form or another, whether it involve excess with sex, food, gambling, illegal or prescription drugs, alcohol or tobacco; whether it is socially sanctioned like the hoarding of money beyond measure and at the expense of others; and even when it involves seeming restraint from carnal passions like the compulsion to lose weight in cases of anorexia; and even when it

involves nothing at all as in sloth. All of us are enticed by our own evil desires. They always promise pleasure but ultimately deliver pain and worse—sometimes much worse.

When the internet was developing one of the first big applications was pornography. The internet was perfect for pornography because deeply desired secrecy is preserved. No longer did someone have to wait for an empty counter to purchase a magazine kept covered to protect innocent eyes. Now you could access pornography privately from the comfort of your home. Then there were smartphones and apps that included features for capturing pictures and videos and sharing them with chatroom acquaintances. Otherwise, everything was confidential. No one could see you.

Or so you thought. Actually there were the eyes of law enforcement watching and waiting for one of those captured and shared files to include an underage participant. You had no idea anyone was watching until one night, around midnight, a knock comes at the door. Guns are drawn; you are cuffed and read your rights while an officer shows a subpoena to search your house. Your spouse is frantic. Your children are scared. Your computers are taken for evidence.

Once indicted, anyone who googles your name reads the sordid. Your employer reads the sordid details. Now you, who up to this point have been like just about anyone here, have a public persona, livelihood, marriage and freedom at extreme risk. You think I am being dramatic here? The horror stories of two separate individuals have recently reached me in the context of pastoral care. Those stories have other things in common, what began as a harmless peek led to a desensitized yearning for more and more until a line was crossed and real devastation began.

I share this, one, for a practical reason. That seemingly anonymous app on your personal cell phone is anything but. There are authorities actively trolling for people who, with a careless tap of a screen, maybe inadvertently step over a serious line. If you are doing that sort of thing, stop it right now. If you cannot stop it—if it is an overwhelming compulsion—there is help. Whether your issue is pornography or alcohol, there is a 12-step program that will help you connect with a higher power that can help you when you are helpless to help yourself. Maybe a first step is to seek out a trusted pastor or counselor—anyone who is experienced in referral.

Easter is all about the resurrecting power of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. There are walking, talking victories all about us. Redeemed sinners who have been saved from their demonic possessions and raised up to new and better and more glorious lives—people who have struggled with the same kind of weakness you have and who have prevailed by the grace of God when they had been powerless to help themselves.

Maybe this season of Lent is a time to give up something more substantive than ice cream or chocolate--something devilish that has promised pleasure but has delivered pain and worse. Christ has beat the devil at his own game and promises to help us do

the same and pass the test and win the prize. Now is the season of spiritual preparation. Now is the time to ensure we will truly have something to celebrate on that glad Easter morning when the faithful rise with Christ.