

Sermon for Lent 1 (the Temptation of Christ)

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Deuteronomy 25:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13; Psalm 91:1-2,9-16

God of Wisdom, Bring your word near to us, on our lips and in our hearts. Amen.

Have you ever wondered what Jesus' life was like before his ministry started. Luke tells us that Jesus was about thirty years old when his ministry began. We don't have much information about those years. I imagine that, up to that point, Jesus was living a pretty normal life, working as a carpenter, taking care of his mother and his brothers and sisters. Maybe hanging out with the other single guys.

Meanwhile, his cousin John, has already begun his ministry. He's going around, calling on the people to return to God, to treat each other fairly, to take care of each other in these difficult times of Roman occupation, proclaiming the good news to the people.

Then, one day, John was preaching and baptizing, and Jesus came along and decided to be baptized as well. And it was at this point that things began to change for Jesus. Our scripture says that the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.

Our text for today begins just after this, with Jesus returning from his trip to Jordan, and being filled with the Holy Spirit. Instead of going straight home, the Spirit led him into the wilderness, where he spent forty days being tested. In scriptures, we frequently see individuals going into the desert to discern, to figure things out, to be away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life in order to focus, to contemplate, to open themselves up to the Holy Spirit, to find the path God has for them. Moses did it. David did it. Elijah did it. And now Jesus is following in their footsteps, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, into the wilderness.

I imagine that this was Jesus' period of discernment, of figuring out what he was going to do with the rest of his life. I'm sure that Jesus had probably already felt a bit of pressure to do something. After all, the angel had told Mary that he would be "great," he would be called "the Son of the Most High," and that "the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, that he would reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there would be no end." No pressure there.

Yet, up until this point, it doesn't seem like Jesus has done much to make this happen. So now, after his baptism, filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus is grappling with his future. Fasting. Praying. Spending time alone. Being tested.

We tend to think of being the Messiah as a glorious thing, kind of like being the king. Lots of power and majesty. Leading an enslaved people to freedom. Parades with waving palm branches. Maybe even a palace or two. But Jesus knew better. He was aware that taking on this ministry could lead to riches and glory, or it could follow another path.

Taking on this ministry could mean leaving behind his current life. Leaving behind his family, his friends, his profession. Letting go of financial stability to live a life dependent on the goodwill of others. Giving up the possibility of being a husband, a father. Constant travel. Frequent criticism. And ever-present danger from both Roman and Jewish authorities.

Theologian David Jacobsen writes, "The issue is not *whether* Jesus is the Son of God, but *how* he will carry out his Spirit-anointed vocation."<sup>1</sup> This was not a decision to be taken lightly. Which path would Jesus take? Riches, glory, power, or service, poverty, sacrifice? Jesus took his time in the desert. Fasting. Praying. Discerning. Testing.

Into this period of discernment, this period of seeking and searching, in walks the devil with his temptations, his tests. The first test seems pretty straightforward—Jesus has not eaten in a long time. He is hungry. And the devil suggests to him, since you are the Son of God,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-41-13-4>

command this stone to become a loaf of bread. Use your powers to do the miraculous for yourself, to take care of yourself, for your own survival.

Remember, Jesus was living in a society plagued by poverty. Experts estimate that as much as 90% of the population of Israel at that time were living in abject poverty, suffering from hunger on a daily basis. Children literally starving in the streets. Would Jesus, as Messiah, use his power to change stones into bread, to feed himself, to feed his people?

Jesus' response is telling, "One does not live by bread alone." Jesus does not discount physical needs, but he reminds the tempter—and us—that having our physical needs met is not enough for health, for fulfillment.

Jesus' response as recorded in Matthew makes this more explicit, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Jesus recognizes that he is being called to meet the needs of the people, their spiritual needs.

The second test has the tempter, the devil, leading Jesus up to the top of the mountain, to see "all the kingdoms of the world." The devil tells him, I will give you all of this, their glory and their authority, if you worship me.

Once again, remember that Jesus is living in an occupied land, under great oppression from Roman rule. How appealing it must have been, the idea that Jesus could become the leader, the king. That he could throw off the yoke of oppression, not just for himself but for all kingdoms.

In those circumstances, having the ability to take charge, to do better for your people, to prevent more bad things from happening, could look very attractive. By accepting the tempter's offer, Jesus could address all the societal needs of his community, and of the world.

But Jesus realized that how you get authority matters. "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Taking shortcuts, making compromises "for the greater good", cooperating with the earthly governments and powers, can be so tempting at times, but here, Jesus

reminds us that we are always and only to serve God. We are to keep our loyalties clear, not to divide them, not to be drawn aside, for what will only be temporary gain.

The third test takes place in Jerusalem, at the temple. There, the tempter tells 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.’”

This test seems a bit different than the others. It isn’t so clearly linked to a physical or societal need. Rather, this test addresses the use of power. Here, the tempter is saying to Jesus, if you really are the Messiah, if you really are the Son of God, prove it! Show me your power. Show the world what you can do. Embrace your identity as Messiah, as king!

Jesus’ response is simple: Do not put the Lord your God to the test. God does not exist to play power games with us, but to bring us to wholeness, to grant us everlasting life.

And it is at this point, through these tests, that Jesus has clarity regarding his vocation, that he sees clearly his path forward. He is to be the Messiah. He is to be the Son of God. But he will not do it as the world (or the tempter) want. He will not be raising up armies to lead into battle. He will not be ascending to the throne, ruling the lands with power and authority.

And Jesus’ answer is that he will carry out his vocation as the Spirit leads, as he has been instructed by the scriptures, as he has learned from the prophets. He will follow the path God has laid out, however rocky and steep that road may be. He will heal. He will teach. He will show us how to live.

While we often view Jesus’ baptism as the beginning of his ministry, I think it is here, following this time of discernment in the desert, following this testing by the tempter, it is here that Jesus embraces his future, that Jesus answers the call of the Spirit, that Jesus takes up the path that God lays out—a path of healing and joy, a path of suffering and tears, a path that ultimately leads to salvation for all.

As my preaching mentor, the late Rev. Grethe Barber, would say, now, what does that mean for us? What lesson can we learn from Jesus’ life? How can we make it real today?

Much like Jesus in our text today, we know what we are called to do. We reviewed it at the beginning of the service— “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>2</sup>

The question we grapple with today, just like Jesus in the desert, is not *what* we are called to do, but rather *how* are we going to do this. How are we going to live out our love for God? How are we going to express our love for our neighbor? All our neighbors, the ones we like and the ones we can’t stand, the ones who agree with us politically and the ones who don’t, the ones who come through the doors of our church and the ones who remain outside the big red doors.

*How* are we going to embody God’s love in this world? A world filled with bitterness and anger and fear. A world that seems to value power and domination over care and concern. A world where love for our neighbors is considered countercultural. How, in this time, in this place, are we going to show God’s love. That is the challenge before us.

So, I would ask that, during this season of Lent, during this time of quiet and contemplation, we each of us, spend some time in the desert—or the mountains, or at the seaside, or in the quiet of our own bedroom—that we each spend some time in discernment, in contemplation, in prayer. That we listen for the voice of the Spirit. That we search out our own path, the path God is inviting us to follow.

During our Lenten Supper Series, we will be discerning together, searching together, for our path, for our way forward as a church community. Once again, we will have an opportunity to listen to the Spirit, to hear that voice together, to find the path God is inviting us to follow, do discover together *how* we are going to be God’s hand and feet in the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 10:25-28

I leave you with this final challenge, how is the Spirit calling you to love God? How is the Spirit calling you to love your neighbor? How is the Spirit calling us as a community to embody God's love in the world? And how are we going to respond?

Amen.