

Scripture Reading March 6th, 2022

Romans 10:8b-13 (NIV)

“The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,”¹ that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: ⁹ If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. ¹¹ As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.”² ¹² For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³ for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”³

Luke 4:1-13 (NIV)

¹ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. ³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” ⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”⁴

⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”⁵

⁹ The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is written: “‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; ¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”⁶ ¹² Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”⁷

¹³ When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

¹ Deut 30:14.

² Isa 28:16 (LXX).

³ Joel 2:32.

⁴ Deut 8:3.

⁵ Deut 6:13.

⁶ Psalm 91:11, 12.

⁷ Deut. 6:16.

Sermon: Tempted by Power

As the season of Lent begins, the world observes the second anniversary of a global pandemic that has taken millions of lives, along with a war in Ukraine pursued by Vladimir Putin and the Russian Army. The pandemic appears to be waning somewhat, but the war in question is just beginning and no one knows where it will lead. From the perspective of many, including me, this war is all about power. In fact, most wars are about power.⁸ They're usually launched when those in charge feel as if their power is being threatened in some way. That seems to be the case here. It's not that Ukraine – or NATO, for that matter - was going to attack Russia, but Putin seems to fear the presence of a democracy on his doorstep. It also looks like he also wanted to settle old grievances concerning the territorial break-up of the Soviet Empire and try and redraw the map regardless of the consequences.

Luke's account of the temptation of Jesus speaks to this issue of *power* in the context of two opposing kingdoms, that of God's reign and of the rulers of this world. In Jesus' day, that was ultimately the Roman empire, of course, and their designated local Palestinian rulers (like Herod Antipas, and Philip the Tetrarch), yet the Jewish religious leaders⁹ had power and influence too.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Gospel writers see a more sinister power of evil behind those earthly power systems, whether they're political or religious, a power that opposes the kind of things God wants to see happen on earth, which includes love, justice, wellbeing, and peace. The ministry of Jesus from his baptism to his death reveals the confrontation between God's kingdom and those who oppose it, including demons and rulers. Today's story of the temptation of Jesus¹¹ reveals a number of significant things, including a glimpse of those very real future tensions.¹²

This story of the temptation by the devil, whose name means "slanderer," or Satan, whose name means "accuser," seems weird to our modern ears. We are often distracted by artistic portrayals of Jesus speaking with a real figure, often depicted in red with horns. However, these temptations could all have been in Jesus' head, like a dark, graphic, vision-like experience with various powerful scenarios being played in his mind. Our temptations today can have an external source or trigger, but our minds then run with them, and we know our imaginations are powerful. However we want to present the force of evil, we know from experience that it's real, insidious, and enslaving, and we know evil doesn't simply disappear if we close our eyes and ignore it. Moreover, temptation is a universal human experience,

⁸ Remember the old adage, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

⁹ Especially the temple elite, the Sanhedrin.

¹⁰ It was their *power* that enabled them to instigate the trial of Jesus and their *influence* ensured Jesus was then tried by Roman Governor Pontius Pilate.

¹¹ Mark 1:12-13 only mentions that these temptations occurred; Matt 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13 provide extensive details from another source (cf. Heb 4:15). These two accounts have subtle and interesting differences, not least is that the order of the last two temptations is reversed. Scholars consider Matthew's as likely the original and Luke has the temptation at the temple as the culmination, tying in with a broader emphasis of the temple in his Gospel. The temptations of Jesus are discussed in Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know*, (Wipf & Stock, 2021), chapter 3.

¹² The conflict of God's reign with Satan is later presented in Luke, e.g., the parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-15); the fall of Satan after the mission of the 70 (Luke 10:17-20), when Jesus explains how he can cast out demons (Luke 11:14-23).

and Jesus *not* having such experiences would mean he wasn't really human. Luke, however, places this story right after his genealogy of Jesus which emphasizes his humanness with a list of descendants going back to Adam. And Adam, of course, was tempted "to be like God," which is also linked to power. It was a temptation to which he and Eve succumbed.¹³ The question is how will Jesus, who Paul describes as the second Adam,¹⁴ respond when he is tempted? Luke also alludes to Israel's time of wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. They grumbled and moaned and were *unfaithful* to God.¹⁵ How will Jesus, who Luke has already told his readers is the Messiah or the Son of God,¹⁶ (they mean the same thing), the individual who represents the new Israel or the new people of God, respond to his trials? These temptations or tests, then, are to ascertain and reveal the *kind* of messiah Jesus will be.¹⁷

The first test is *personal* and arose because Jesus was famished.¹⁸ Temptation is often most intense and effective when we are vulnerable, insecure, anxious, tired, and alone. We therefore need to be aware of that fact and be on our guard. The devil says to him, "Since¹⁹ you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus replies, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"²⁰ The underlying question is will Jesus use his *power* to satisfy his own desires?²¹ Christians today sometimes make the mistake of thinking that as long as they are pursuing the right aims in their public life, what they do in their private life doesn't matter much. That's the kind of lie the devil whispers to Jesus.

Following a Sunday School presentation of this account, a worried parent was talking to her five-year-old child and asked, "If we were at the store, and your dad and I were in one aisle and you were in another, and the devil said you should take some of that candy, what would you say back to the devil?" The boy's face lit up and he said without hesitation, "I would say thank you!" (That's one example of how a poor Sunday school syllabus can create messy parenting problems!) Even so, this text is about Jesus' *choice* and *our* choices. Will the Messiah trust God to provide for his basic human needs? The Israelites in the wilderness didn't, yet God did graciously supply them with manna, quail, and water.²² As becomes clear later in Luke's Gospel, the kind of messiah Jesus would become is one who would willingly experience human suffering, *trusting* that God's provision would come at the appropriate time.

¹³ See Gen 3:1-13. Of course, the serpent was "crafty" or cunning, speaking half-truths about God (v.4-5).

¹⁴ See Rom 5:12-19; 1 Cor 15:21-22, 45-49.

¹⁵ Moreover, the mention of forty days alludes to Moses who also fasted for the same duration before God gave him the Ten Commandments (see Exod 34:27-28. See also 1 Kgs 19:7-12, where Elijah had a similar fast, ending with a powerful encounter with God. Compare 1 Kgs 19:5, 7 with Matt 4:11; note Luke, oddly, has no mention of angels.)

¹⁶ For "Messiah" (or Christ) see Luke 2:10b-11; for Son of God simply see the baptism account in Luke 3:21-22 (and 1:32).

¹⁷ The Greek for translated "tempt" or "test" can mean both; in light of Deut 8:2-3, I suggest "test" is better. This also makes the connection with other Jewish "testing" story (e.g., Job 1-2); this theological topic needs to be handled with care! See also [11] and <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Temptation-of-Jesus.pdf> .

¹⁸ See Luke 4:2b. (See also [21].)

¹⁹ "Since" is better than "if" here, given the devil would know that Jesus is God's Son.

²⁰ Luke 4:3-4; Jesus cites Deut 8:3 – see also [12].

²¹ This can be symbolically extended to material and economic power. Is this how Jesus' kingdom would bless the poor? Would he *bribe* people to follow him?

²² Exod 16:1—17:7. This connection is present in Jesus feeding the multitudes in Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:12-17 and more explicitly in John 6.

The second test is about *political power*. Is Jesus going to be a Davidic king who would re-establish the kingdom of Israel by force, as many Jews at the time hoped? The devil says, in effect, “Think of all the *good* you could do if *you* ruled the world! All you need to do is worship me and *all* that power is yours.” Now given that the devil tells lies, we can’t be sure if he has that kind of power or whether he would keep his promise. Like before, Jesus cites the scriptures in his reply: “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”²³ Remember the Israelites worshiped the golden calf in the wilderness and recognize that Jesus was being tested here to see if he would *compromise* and worship something other than God.²⁴ In this temptation, the *ends* might be desirable and right, but the *means* are *not*.

The third test is about *religious power*, and it’s as if Jesus is transported in his mind to a tall wall at the temple. Many Jews expected the messiah would be a religious reformer; so, would Jesus *coerce* faith a supernatural display of *power*. The devil tempts him to jump, and quotes scriptures to Jesus saying that God will catch him!²⁵ This shows how quoting the Bible can be misused to promote evil; so let’s all beware of that and be discerning. The devil is the master of distortions and lies. He presents falsehoods as truth, wants as needs, distrust as faith. At stake, then and now, is *who* will be trusted and worshipped. Jesus responds with another quote: “You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.”²⁶ Jesus is the *kind* of messiah who *trusts* God and who won’t put God to a foolish test and then expect God to rescue him.²⁷

Jesus passes these three tests with his integrity intact, but Luke foreshadows that the devil will return to challenge Jesus’ resolve again at an “opportune” time.²⁸ One such example is in the Garden of Gethsemane, just prior to Jesus’ arrest.²⁹

Let’s pause and consider this matter of temptation for a moment. Ironically, being tempted is *not* a sign of weakness, it’s a sign of strength. Temptations are not about what we *cannot* do, but for us to *do* what is *within* our power. The greater the person’s capabilities or responsibilities, the greater the temptation. I said earlier, Luke stresses Jesus’ humanness here, and for these temptations to be *real*, he must have had the *kind* of power or capabilities that the devil probed. Jesus was genuinely struggling with what it *means* to be about God’s business.³⁰ Being committed to following God’s ways doesn’t exempt *anyone* from this struggle. Even Spirit-filled people are tempted and tested to do things that are desirable but not wise to do. In fact, it is those who are most engaged in God’s ways who seemed to experience the most intensity to the opposition of evil. Let’s be alert!

²³ Luke 4:8, citing Deut 6:13 and Luke adds the word “only.” Note, “authority” is a big theme in Luke – and the other gospels.

²⁴ Indeed, part of Israel’s overall history has been its propensity to worship other gods, despite the warnings of the prophets.

²⁵ Luke 4:10-11, citing Ps 91:11, 12.

²⁶ Luke 4:12, citing Deut 6:16. Israel often tested God, rather than trusted him.

²⁷ We need to be aware of this when it comes to health choices, e.g., refusing available surgeries or vaccinations in “faith,” expecting God to heal supernaturally instead.

²⁸ Luke 4:13. The Greek word for time here is *kairos*, not *chronos*; see Luke 22:3, 31-32.

²⁹ See Luke 22:39-53. (Luke simply says Mount of Olives, rather than Gethsemane – cf. Matt 26:36-46; Mark 13:32-42.)

³⁰ Or what messiahship entails, in this case.

Jesus, unlike some leaders, resisted the temptation to *abuse* his power for personal gain.³¹ He didn't seize political control as the oppressed might have hoped, or leap from the temple wall as those who long for *proof* of God would want. Jesus *didn't* flirt with temptation or argue with the devil; that's a recipe to play with an idea until it becomes too attractive to resist. Instead Jesus wanted to be faithful to his (baptismal) calling³² and to the purposes of God, which *doesn't* mean adherence to a set of rules and regulations but to life in the Spirit. And that means, in part, not compromising to popular demands or to what we know to be wrong. Put more positively, at the heart of our resistance to temptation is our love and loyalty to a God who is already called us his *beloved* children. That means the spiritual discipline of fighting temptation is *not* about self-hatred or rejecting aspects of our God-given humanity, but celebrating God's gift of life responsibly, both morally and ethically. Remember, resisting evil and ministering to human need is not simply down to human willpower and psychological strategies, important though they are, God's presence is offered and available and, in this case, Jesus also gains strength and resolve from the *appropriate* use of scriptures. Many find that's a good example to follow; we can obtain *strength* from the Bible in our trials today, whatever they are, and not just *comfort*.

As the season of Lent begins, we can use this story as an opportunity to reflect on our spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, study, generosity, justice, etc., as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus toward the events in Jerusalem. In the process, we may feel the need to repent and to bolster our resolve, with the help of the Holy Spirit. Intentionality is a good thing but combine that with a receptivity to God's *grace* and don't be overwhelmed by guilt. Remember that in Paul's letters we are told that through baptism we have become God's *adopted* children; we too are children of God because of the *faithfulness* of Jesus Christ.³³ Just as the temptations of Jesus demonstrated the *kind* of Son of God – or Messiah – he would become, so our trials in life help to establish what *kind* of “children of God” we will be. Will we be *faithful*? Will we *trust* God for the basic provisions of life? Will we trust God even if that path contains suffering and hardship? Will we trust God alone, or worship other idols - like money, sex, and power? In short, will we be tempted into ways of darkness, including abuse of power, or will we faithfully follow the Light? Like for Jesus, distracting temptations challenge our identity and integrity,³⁴ let us continue to be faithful to *our* calling, not just for Lent, but every day - and with the Spirit's help.

I end by quoting words from scripture: “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”³⁵ Amen. Let us pray.

³¹ Or to solve world hunger by a miracle, as the poor might have hoped he would do.

³² In Luke's account, Jesus' calling was from birth (see Luke 1); I mention baptism here to connect with *us*.

³³ See Gal 3:26-27; 4:6-7; Rom 8:14-17 (NET, NTE).

³⁴ This is true both as individuals and as a church.

³⁵ 1 Peter 5:8-9; see also 5-7.