

The Three Temptations

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — Lent I, February 13, 2005

Luke 4:1-13 NIV

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. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'"

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

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. For it is written: " 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

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

With Ash Wednesday, we've come into the season of Lent — traditionally a time for self-examination and self-denial, marked by repentance and confession of sin. The New Testament writers teach us that, through our baptism and our ongoing commitment to the Lord, we've entered into his life and become members of him. Therefore, *his story is our story*. His story is ours in both its anguish and suffering and its triumph and glory. Through this sober time called Lent we enter into that story of Jesus' pathway toward the Passion, and the cross of Calvary. We become participants in the journey that would take our Lord through suffering and death on our behalf — the willing Lamb of God, through whose sacrifice all who belong to Christ are restored to communion with our heavenly Father.

Jesus' road to Calvary didn't begin with those events we've been looking at during the Epiphany season, through which the Father's glory was first manifested in the Son. It didn't even begin with his birth. No, it began long before that! Scripture even suggests that Jesus' journey to the cross began before the world was created, for John calls him "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). And yet, his pathway toward the Passion had to emerge from the events of his earthly life. It had to be worked out in what the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews calls "the days of his flesh," days through which Jesus, "although he was a Son, . . . learned obedience through what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:7-8). It's traditional to begin Lent with a look at one of the key chapters in this story, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

In the Gospels, Jesus' temptation follows right after his baptism by John in the River Jordan. At his baptism, Jesus hears the voice from heaven, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). And immediately, the Gospels tell us, the Spirit takes Jesus into the wilderness to fast and pray for forty days. That's the origin, by the way, of the forty days of Lent. And at the end of those days Jesus, weak with hunger, is tested by Satan.

How do we know what happened in the wilderness? Because Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us. But how did they know? Jesus hadn't called his disciples yet. He was alone in that place. Only Jesus could have known what happened there. Only he could have told the story to his disciples, who have passed it on to us. For it was a deeply personal thing, this testing Jesus endured, and it came because of what he had just heard from the Father: "You are my Son." *You're the One I've called to redeem my people; you're my Beloved, the Christ*. But what sort of Messiah would Jesus be? That's what the temptation is all about.

The word Satan means "adversary," or accuser. And this adversary comes to the hungry Jesus and says, "If you're the Son of God, just turn these rocks into bread." *Go ahead, solve your hunger*

problem with a wave of your hand — if you're who you think you are! What a test this must have been for a starving man who knows he's the Messiah, the anointed of the Lord! The tempter entices him, but Jesus turns him down.

Satan comes with another test. He makes all the kingdoms of the world flash before Jesus' eyes. *Your people are oppressed, ground under the heel of a ruthless foreign power. If you're who you think you are, you can throw them off and take control for yourself. You can set your people free! All you have to do is worship me instead of that invisible God who's done nothing for you!* What a temptation for a sensitive and compassionate man who, every day, sees the humiliation of his neighbors under the Roman boot. The tempter's plan is appealing — but again Jesus refuses to go along with it.

How does Jesus throw off Satan's test? He fights off the tempter by hurling back at him a line from the Word of God. The tempter is clever; he begins to get the drift. So he comes back a third time with a Scripture of his own. *If you're who you think you are, why not go jump off the highest tower of the Temple into the valley below? After all, doesn't Psalm 91 say that God will send angels to grab you before you hit bottom? Yeah, if you're really the Son of God, that will make people sit up and take notice! Go for it!* But, again, Jesus fends off the tempter with a word from Scripture.

"Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. . . . Worship the Lord your God and serve him only. . . . Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Three lines from the Scriptures — each time, by the way, a passage from the Book of Deuteronomy, the Fifth Book of Moses. Jesus hurls the tempter back with one simple weapon: "It is written." With the Word of God, he throws Satan off the track — at least for the time being, for as Luke says he's lurking there till what he thinks is "an opportune time" to test Jesus again. That time, of course, will come when Jesus is put to his final test, in the Garden and on Calvary's cross.

With three lines from God's Word, our Lord sends the tempter packing. God's Word is the expression of his whole "being," it's the embodiment of his creative power. Psalm 33:6 says, "By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth." When God speaks, sickness, ignorance, injustice, evil and even the chaos of nothingness and death must yield before the voice of the Creator of all, for his authority is in his Word. And the witness of the New Testament is that Jesus the Christ is himself the Word of God, the expression of the Creator's will and purpose in human form.

But let's back up a moment and look at those three temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness. I said earlier that this testing had to do with what sort of Messiah Jesus would be. To see what was going on, we need to understand that human culture has three components. Culture is made up of *technology* — how we solve physical problems. It's made up of *social organization* — how order is established in society. And it's made up of *systems of belief* — how people establish priorities and values and meaning. Jesus was tested in all three areas. *Turn stones into bread* — solve the technology problem, provide food for everyone, and whatever else people need, by some kind of process that turns raw materials into useful things. *Take political control* — establish your authority over every government so we'll have law and order and world peace. *Prove you're God's representative* — Do a miracle and show which religion or set of values is the "right" one. Jesus faced all three temptations. They were each temptations to be a *cultural Messiah*, to define himself in terms of the dreams and expectations of human society. But because they meshed with man's agenda and not God's, they were all *temptations to avoid the cross*.

I began by saying that we, as the people who belong to Christ, enter into his story. Where do we see ourselves in the story of Jesus' temptation?

Sometimes we joke about temptation. Offered a second piece of pie, we might say, "I can resist anything but temptation." Sometimes, when I was a child, Mother would serve those vanilla wafer sandwiches with frosting inside for dessert. Once she offered another one to a guest and he answered, "It's a temptation." Thereafter we kids always called those things "temptations." We associate temptation with the tendency to eat too much, or with the urge to engage in sex outside of marriage, or

with the opportunity to get ahead financially by dishonest means, or with any situation that allows us to gain unfair advantage over others.

Those things may be real tests of our commitment to serve and obey the lord, but the story of Jesus' testing shows that temptation goes much deeper than outward actions or sinful impulses. Jesus' testing had to do with how he understood himself as the Son of God. It had to do with his calling to serve the people of God as their Messiah. What kind of Messiah would he be? In the same way, we're tested as to who we think we really are. As we follow the Lord in his baptism, we also follow him in his temptation. The writer of Hebrews says, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus' story is our story, too.

Turn these stones into bread. Are we tempted to think our problems will all be solved when we have the latest technology? Ancient peoples, and many today, believe in *magic*. Magic, whatever form it takes, is a way of manipulating our environment to get something we want. Technology can be just a modern form of magic, and just as evil. Why? Because it leaves God out of the picture. Magic and technology are ways of solving problems without having to depend on the Lord. God, who made the human mind, has given us great powers of inventiveness and put us in charge of the raw materials of his earth. But if we use that inventiveness while forgetting its source — and even invent and use technology that makes it easier to disobey him — then we've yielded to that first temptation Jesus resisted in the wilderness. We've defined ourselves through that first component of human culture. We've aligned ourselves with the agenda of technology.

Take control over other authorities. Are we tempted to think our problems will be solved once we can get other people to do what we want them to do? We expend a lot of time and effort trying to control the actions of others. It happens in politics and world affairs, but it also happens in personal relationships. "If I could just make my husband . . ." "If I could only get my wife to . . ." "If I could make my children . . ." "If I could only convince my boss to . . ." You fill in the blanks. Through domineering and demanding behavior, or through emotional "games" or other more subtle forms of manipulation, we try to control others in the belief that our way is the right way and the only way. And again, we've left God out of the picture. We've defined ourselves through the agenda of that organizational component of culture, making ourselves the arbiter of order and structure in our little world.

Do something dramatic and show everybody who's in charge. Maybe we won't be jumping off any tall buildings, as the tempter suggested to Jesus. But there's always the temptation to make ourselves the center of all value and authority, what sociologists call the "unencumbered self" or the "imperial self." Our culture encourages this. "Have it *your* way." "It's *your* body, you can do what you want to with it." "Nobody can tell *me* what to do." "That's just the way I am." When somebody tells us to "have a nice day," we're tempted to reply, "Don't tell *me* what kind of day to have." (I usually say, "No thanks, just had one.") There are lots of ways to tell the world we're Number One: temper tantrums, pulling away from friends or family, jealous competition, always having to "win," constantly talking about ourselves and not listening to others. Most of us don't do anything so dramatic, but we all face the temptation to make ourselves the center of our own world of meaning and value, and to define the rest of the world in terms of *our* needs and feelings — so there can be no question who's in charge, and it isn't the Lord.

Yes, Jesus' story is ours as well, and like him we're all *tempted to avoid the cross*. If we can define our calling in life as something that doesn't involve self-denial and sacrifice, then we think we've solved our problems. But if we do this we've sold out to the tempter. He wants to keep us from following the Lord on the pathway to his Passion, because he knows that once we take up our cross and follow Jesus he has lost us. The world, with its cultural agenda of materialism and domination and manipulation, must give us up to the call of a loving God — a God who loved us so much that he gave his only Son to bring us back to himself. In place of self-seeking death, he gives us life in his presence.

We have the promise of God, through the apostle James: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he *will flee* from you” (James 4:7). Fight the tempter as Jesus did, with the Word of God that brings his presence and power into our situation: “It is written.” Fight the tempter by entering with Jesus into the story of his battle with temptation, the story of the cross. Fight the tempter *with Jesus’ help*. As the author of Hebrews writes, “For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess” (Hebrews 2:17–3:1).

Sermon text ©2005 Richard C. Leonard
Bible text © as applicable