

**Temptation and Testing**  
Luke 4:1-13  
Rev. Don J. Best  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Bethel Presbyterian Church  
March 10, 2019

For our gospel reading today, we go back in the chronology of Luke's story. Our reading is after the baptism of Jesus, when he goes into the wilderness for forty days. This story is in all three synoptic gospels, and each year this reading, from one of the gospels, is read on the first Sunday in Lent. It is almost impossible to miss the connection between the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness, and the forty days of Lent.

This morning, we hear Luke's story of the temptation, or testing of Jesus in the wilderness. Listen to Luke, chapter 4, verses 1 through 13:

Gospel Reading

<sup>4:1</sup> Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

<sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

<sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' <sup>11</sup> and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

<sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

## Sermon

There is the old riddle: "If a tree falls in the forest, and there is no one there to hear it; does it make a sound?" A more modern version, as we begin another campaign cycle, goes something like: "If (*insert the name of your least favorite politician here*) makes a speech and no one is there to hear it, are they still lying?"

For some, our reading from Luke poses the same type of question. Luke presents the events in story format, told by the all-knowing narrator. Jesus was alone in the wilderness with the devil. It is not likely that the devil shared his story of failure. And the events are not presented by Jesus. This begs the question: How does the narrator know the story?

Like most scripture, it is not always important how we get the story, but what we can learn from the story. Naturally, we will begin with the story itself.

These events follow the baptism of Jesus. Where a voice from heaven proclaims; "You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Even though this may have been a private message for Jesus, we, the hearers of the Gospel, now know that Jesus is the Son of God.

When our story begins, the Holy Spirit (which descended on Jesus as a dove) leads Jesus into the wilderness. Where Jesus spends forty days: Forty days with nothing to eat. Forty days, Luke says, being tempted by the devil. Then, when the forty days are over, the devil really steps up his game and begins testing Jesus.

I want to pause here because often people have issue with the idea of the devil, the red man with horns and a pointed tail holding a pitch fork. But let's not get stuck on that. In this case, suffice it to say, that when telling a story, it is easier to present events and interactions in the form of dialogue between two characters. So there is Jesus, and the devil.

The first test seems simple enough: "...command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus is hungry. According to Luke, Jesus has had nothing to eat for forty days. What's the harm in a little snack? Jesus replies to the devil by quoting scripture: "It is written, 'one does not live by bread alone.' "

The second test is much more elaborate. The devil claims to have power over all the kingdoms of the world, and offers them to Jesus, if Jesus would only worship the devil. The down side of this one is easy to spot; Jesus could never worship the devil. Besides, who believes the devil makes good on his word?

Again, Jesus responds with a quote from scripture: "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'"

For the third test, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, and to the top of the temple. Where he tells Jesus; "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here." Then, as if the devil is onto Jesus' game, he quotes scripture as well: "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.'"

If the devil's quote sounds familiar, it is from Psalm 91, verses 11 & 12, which we just heard, in our responsive psalm reading.

Jesus of course replies with his own scripture: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Then, Luke writes: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until a more opportune time."

Each of the three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke have a version of this story. Matthew's version is very similar to Luke's, with the exception that the order of the two latter temptations is switched. Mark, on the other hand, barely mentions Jesus' wilderness temptation. After Jesus is baptized, Mark 1:12-13 says: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

So, what is it about this story that makes it important enough that all three: Matthew, Mark, and Luke mention it, and two of them go into great detail, when telling their story of Jesus' life and ministry?

First, it tells us about Jesus. The original audience hearing this story would link Jesus with Moses and the history of Israel. The three scriptures Jesus quotes are words attributed to Moses from Deuteronomy. Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. Moses was led into the wilderness by God. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness. Moses spent forty days on the mountain top receiving the law, and Israel spent forty years in the wilderness before they could enter the Promised Land. All three tests reflect back on experiences of Israel in the desert with Moses. Bread reminds us of the Manna God provided to Israel, in the desert. The second temptation would require Jesus to worship the devil – Israel cast a golden calf and began to worship it. The third temptation was to test God on his word – Israel repeatedly tested God with their complaining in the wilderness. All three tests, which Jesus passed, were areas where Israel struggled, less successfully, on their journey through the wilderness. Associating Jesus with the life and words of Moses tells the hearers of the gospel that he is to be a great leader of the people, the people of Israel.

For the Christian church which has from the beginning taught that Jesus was "fully human," these temptation stories show that even the Son of God, the

human Jesus, struggled and endured temptation. Hebrews 4:15 says: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." Jesus, the Son of God was tested, just as we are tested in our own lives, but Jesus did not sin.

This brings us to the second reason this story is important to us. The temptation scene can serve as an example story to all of us who are tested. A careful look at these three tests reveals that each of them offers something desirable. True testing is not an offer to fall, but to rise!

Turning stones into bread – thousands and thousands of hungry people could be fed with this simple trick, but Jesus is meant to be the bread of life. Jesus' mission is to feed not just the physically hungry, but those who are spiritually hungry, those who endure the hunger of sin, need to be filled with God's righteousness. Who among us has not been tempted to satisfy some hunger the easy way, rather than waiting for true fulfillment? Filled with the Holy Spirit, we are called to feed the hungry and the spiritually malnourished.

Jesus was offered all the kingdoms of the world. At that time Rome was in control of the world. How much better off would the world have been if the Son of God was in charge? But Jesus was sent to announce the coming of God's kingdom. As followers of Jesus Christ our reward is not earthly power on the world's terms. Our power comes from God through the Holy Spirit, and our victory is eternal victory in the kingdom of God.

The third temptation, Jesus faced, was to prove the existence of God and the truth of God's word. I would guess that most of us, at one time or another, have longed for proof of God's existence and certainty of God's call on our lives. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and armed with the word of God. With these things he was able to defeat the devil and pass his greatest tests. As followers of Jesus Christ, we too face the world filled with the Holy Spirit, and with the knowledge of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, if we remain faithful; we are also ready to face the battles of this world. Not just for this season of Lent, but for every season of life yet to come, until we are rewarded with our seat at the heavenly banquet.

Let us pray:

Holy God, as we enter this season of Lent, help us to remain faithful to your Holy Spirit and to your Son Jesus Christ. As he was tested yet remained unstained, help us to face the testing in our lives, and remain true to our calling to serve you in this world. Guide our feet and hearts O God in your ways. AMEN.