

The First Sunday in Lent
March 6, 2022
“If you are the Son of God ...”
A Sermon Based on Luke 4:1-13
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Rembrandt, Satan Tempting Jesus

Luke 4:1-13 (NRSV): Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where 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. ³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” ⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And 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. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” ⁹Then 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, ¹⁰for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ ¹¹and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” ¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Today's scripture about the temptation of Jesus is a fascinating one, partly for this reason. While the other stories we have about Jesus in the Gospels are told as people observed him, there were no eyewitnesses to this event. Perhaps Jesus told his disciples about this experience when one of them, likely Thomas the sometimes-annoying-questioner, asked him: "So please explain to me, Jesus, why you have instructed us every single day to include the petition "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" in our prayer to God our Father? And then, in response, Jesus told them this story about how he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, to strengthen them for the journey ahead, since facing temptation is part and parcel of the human experience.

It was Jesus' first real day on the job. He had just been baptized, was praying, and then ***"the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*** (Lk 3:21-22) One can only imagine the shock waves that must have spread through the spiritual realm when these words were spoken. This was the inevitable dreaded moment that the devil had been waiting for. The moment when his many powers were about to be challenged.

What do you imagine the devil looks like? Red skin, horns and tail, a pitchfork, a sinister scowl, skulking around corners while waiting for the next victim? The devil is pictured this way in our popular imaginations. But truer to the real way the devil actually works is perhaps how the Dutch artist Rembrandt sketched the devil (which I've included for you to see). Matt Fitzgerald has said that *"Rembrandt drew several depictions of the devil tempting Jesus. In one of them the two look like friends. They appear to be ambling down a country road, deep in conversation. The devil is a half step behind Jesus. His head is skeletal, but there is an urgent, deeply human look on his face. He is reasoning with Jesus, not menacing him. One of his wings is thrown over Jesus' shoulder in an almost familial manner. He leans in, mouth open slightly, eyes on Christ, speaking quietly, a heavy stone in his hands. He holds the stone out as if it were a gift. 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'"*¹ And the spiritual powers of the universe wait with bated breath to hear Jesus' response.

Our passage begins with these words: ***"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan [where he was baptized] and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil...."*** (Lk 4:1-2).

¹ Matt Fitzgerald, "Homiletical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Vol. I, Chapters 1-11*, Cynthia A. Jarvis & E. Elizabeth Johnson, Editors, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 93.

This passage immediately reminds us of another passage from near the beginning of the Bible in the book of Exodus, which describes the escape of the Hebrew slaves from their Egyptian masters with these words: ***“So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea.”*** (Exodus 13:18). This morning let’s travel with Jesus for forty days into the wilderness as he symbolically reenacts the journey of his ancestors, who themselves traveled through the harsh wilderness for forty years as the temptations that they faced readied them to assume the mantle and responsibility of being God’s chosen people. This is the same symbolic 40-day pilgrim journey to the cross that we too are asked to reenact during Lent as we are asked to explore our weak spots where we might give into temptations as our loyalty to God is questioned.

Luke lets us know that the Holy Spirit did not force Jesus into the wilderness but rather accompanied Jesus as he willingly entered into an intentional time of testing and spiritual purifying before being sent out into the world to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel. The scriptures tell us that Jesus immediately began fasting: ***“He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished”*** (Lk 4:3). Fasting is an ancient spiritual practice in which one gives up nourishment at a physical level so that one’s spiritual heart might be purified to be available to more clearly hear the voice of God. *“A fast is not about penitence and beating up on yourself. ... A fast is really training—exactly like athletic training—so that our whole embodied being can be tuned up to support a spiritual aim we wish to achieve.”*² What was Jesus’ spiritual aim? He was undergoing a process of spiritual purification to fine tune his heart to be better able to listen to and be guided by the Holy Spirit as he was about to be challenged by the devil to clarify not just that he was God’s Beloved Son but what kind of son he was. Whose voice would he listen to? What was his mission to be? Was there anything that he could be tempted to put above what God was calling him to do?

Jesus trained spiritually for this encounter with the devil for forty days. He had much time on his hands and, by the scriptures he quotes from the Hebrew scriptures, we know that he reflected deeply on the wilderness experience of his Hebrew ancestors. Indeed, he would face the same temptations that they did in the wilderness but, unlike them, he would prevail.

Our story begins with Jesus, in the wilderness, being famished. I think most of us know what it is like to be hungry. Indeed, there may be some stomachs rumbling in here today as you anticipate which restaurant you will go to after church today.

² Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus* (Boston/London: Shabhala, 2008), 126.

But I seriously doubt any of us know what it is like to be either famished with hunger or parched with thirst. At this point every cell of Jesus' body would have been needing something to eat after all nourishment (even the locusts his cousin John the Baptist ate!) had been withheld for 40 days. And so the devil approaches Jesus when he is weak. But not the red colored, horned, pitchfork holding type of devil. I'm imagining someone more like Rembrandt's depiction. In my imagination, as Jesus is wandering, he gets to the top of a sand dune and looking out he notices a person sitting in front of a small fire created from the desert shrubbery. They see each other. The person smiles, waves, and motions to Jesus to join him. Jesus approaches and the stranger invites him to sit down. The stranger, an ordinary looking man about Jesus' age, is making flat bread by heating it on a hot stone that sits on top of the fire. There is nothing like the scent of freshly baking bread, is there? He reaches out to hand something to Jesus. Perhaps Jesus thinks that it is a piece of bread but, as he looks down, he sees a single stone. As the stranger hands the stone to the famished Jesus, he kindly and encouragingly says with concern in his voice: ***"[Jesus] If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."*** (Lk 4:3). Suddenly both of their true identities are revealed. The stranger is the devil. Jesus is God's Beloved Son. This is the encounter the universe had been waiting with bated breath for.

It seems that Jesus thought back to his Hebrew ancestors wandering for those forty years in the desert, who also were famished. It says in the book of Exodus that: ***"The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness [and] said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt ... for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger'"*** (Ex 16:13). Moses, who like Jesus also had fasted for forty days in the wilderness on at least two occasions, prayed to God to help and God rained down a bread-like food called 'manna' for them. But even after they filled their stomachs with this heavenly bread, they now began to complain about the lack of variety in their diet (Num 11:6). Jesus would have been familiar with this story as it is retold in the book of Deuteronomy, where it states: ***"Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. ³ He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."*** (Deut 8:2-3)

As the devil encouraged Jesus to simply change one stone into one loaf of bread, Jesus drew directly from his ancestor's experiences and replied unwaveringly and with absolute clarity and conviction, quoting this same scripture: ***"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"*** Where his ancestors had failed, Jesus succeeded in showing that he truly was the Son of God.

Next the devil, having failed in tempting Jesus regarding the material goods of the world, tries to entice him through a different manner. We can imagine them walking along together, chatting about the weather or ways of the world, as the devil tries to be his best buddy. Maybe the devil is talking to Jesus about the horrible oppression of the Roman authorities, their heavy taxation, the widespread poverty, their constant fear and anxiety. The Israelites, after all, lived in a state of occupation as the Romans had invaded their homeland and installed a puppet government. Today we watch with great alarm and anxiety as the Russians have invaded the Ukraine with the intention of decapitating the present government and installing a puppet government to subjugate those who live there. As we watch the news, don't we want to find ways to alleviate their suffering? Surely Jesus wanted to alleviate the suffering of his people should he have the power to do so. And the devil offered him exactly this opportunity. The scriptures say: ***⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And 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. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."*** (Luke 4:5-6)

Wow! That's quite an offer isn't it! All Jesus needed to do was worship the devil rather than God. In fact, the devil was offering Jesus an easy life, where he could rule the kingdoms and ease their suffering, while God was offering Jesus a life marked by suffering, called to be a servant whose path led to the cross. The devil was offering Jesus absolute political power on earth in exchange for Jesus worshipping him. In this temptation, Jesus was reenacting the test set before the Israelites, who got fed up waiting for their leader Moses to return from the mountain top where he was receiving the Ten Commandments from God. Exodus 32 tells us the story of the Israelites going to Moses' brother Aaron, saying to him: ***"Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."*** (Ex 32:1). Aaron told them to give him all their gold jewelry. From it he fashioned a Golden Calf, saying to the people: ***"These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"*** (Ex 32:4). They worshipped this Golden Calf, dancing around it. The Israelites (led by Aaron at this point) failed this important test of worshipping God alone, the lynchpin of the Ten Commandments.

Jesus passed this same test. When the devil offered him all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would worship him, Jesus resolutely replied, by reciting from this passage from Deuteronomy that tells the story of the Golden Calf: ***“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”*** (Luke 4:8).

But if the devil couldn’t get Jesus by tempting him with material things or political power, he now turned his attention to the biggest temptation of all, namely spiritual or religious power. The devil now leads Jesus to the place that features most prominently in and bookends Luke’s entire Gospel: the sacred Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple plays a more central role in Luke than any of the other Gospels. Luke’s journey with Jesus opens up, after all, in the Jerusalem Temple with a series of prophetic moments about Jesus by Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna. *“The Gospel of Luke is so obsessed with Jerusalem’s role in Jesus’ story that it spends an entire ten chapters narrating his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:28).”*³ Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection all occur in relation to the Temple Jerusalem. And the Gospel of Luke also closes with the disciples return to Jerusalem to celebrate Christ’s resurrection and ascension. Thus we understand why the final, most enticing temptation, would feature the Temple in Jerusalem. The scriptures say: ***“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,”¹⁰for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’¹¹and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”*** (Luke 4:9-11)

Here we should imagine the devil kind of morphing into a friendly Jewish religious leader, scriptures in hand, who, as they sit together up on the pinnacle of the Temple, does a little Bible study with Jesus. After all, if Jesus could recite scripture to the devil, the devil could throw some scripture back at Jesus. Hey Jesus, if you are who you say you are, if you are the Son of God, do a little trick for us. Jump off the top of the Temple and show all of us how you will be caught by the angels! I know everything will be fine. See here what our beloved King David said (Psalm 91) about those like you who put their trust in God, assuring us of God’s protection. As the devil, in the form of a pious Jewish teacher, points to a certain place in the scrolls of scripture, he reads:

³ Shively T.J. Smith, “Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture, in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 2*, Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 36-37.

¹ *You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
 who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
² will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress;
 my God, in whom I trust.”
³ For he will deliver you ...
¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
 to guard you in all your ways.
¹² On their hands they will bear you up,
 so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. (Ps. 91:1-3,11-12)*

Don't worry Jesus! Jump off! You'll be okay. And you are the Son of God after all! Remember that the Psalmist promises: *‘[God] will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ ... ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’*” But Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, recalled the wilderness experience of the Israelites at Massah when they were thirsting. They rebelled against Moses, taunting him to test God (Exodus 17:2-3), with the exasperated Moses angrily responding: *“Why do you test the LORD?”* Jesus would have remembered the later description of this event from Deuteronomy 6, where it is written: *¹² take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ... ¹⁴ Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you ... ¹⁶ Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.* (Deut 6:12, 14,16) And Jesus, filled with the Spirit, answered the devil by returning the volley of the devil's scripture with an even more powerful scripture: *“It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”* (Lk 4:12).

With his final temptation, Jesus was now ready to begin his public ministry. He had reenacted the wilderness experience of his ancestors, doing what they and Moses were not able to do. Jesus had successfully passed all the tests put before him. “If you are the Son of God ...” the devil said. *“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here ...”* Jesus stood his ground. Jesus showed where his allegiance lay. Jesus saw that the lust for power over things material, political, and religious could not remove his allegiance to God.

While Jesus had previously stood with the devil on a high mountain looking out over all the kingdoms of the world as they were offered to him, and then had been on the highest pinnacle of Jesus' beloved Temple in Jerusalem where he had been given an opportunity to show off his miraculous skills and test God, he suddenly found himself back in the

wilderness of the desert with the devil. Perhaps the devil took a moment to extinguish the fire upon which he had been heating up a stone to bake his bread. The devil said his good-byes, perhaps in a friendly manner, promising Jesus that he would meet with him again. The scripture closes with this line: ¹³***When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*** (Luke 4:13).

And when was this ‘opportune time’? As we continue our Lenten journey with Jesus to the cross, where we too need to be tested by God as we purify our hearts before God, we will meet up with the devil again in so many places, but most glaringly in the form of the people who taunted and derided Jesus in his final hours as he was suffering on a Cross. Hear these words anew, listening to them in connection with the conversations we have just heard between Jesus and the devil in the wilderness: ³⁵***And when they had crucified [Jesus], they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots;*** ³⁶***then they sat down there and kept watch over him.*** ³⁷***Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” ...*** ³⁹***Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads*** ⁴⁰***and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”*** (Matt 27:35-37, 39-40)

Does this sound familiar to you? Have you heard this voice come up before in scripture? If you are the Son of God ... ***“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here ...” “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”***

Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness had prepared him for this very moment. We have learned enough about Jesus to know that he could heal the sick, feed the hungry, raise people from the dead, so the angels would surely rescue him if he decided to take the easy way out and come down from the cross. What would Jesus do, faced with this ultimate test? Let us open up our minds and hearts to hear how this chapter ends:

³⁹***Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads*** ⁴⁰***and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”*** ⁴¹***In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying,*** ⁴²***“He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.*** ⁴³***He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’”*** ⁴⁴***The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.***

⁴⁵ From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶ And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." ⁴⁸ At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." ⁵⁰ Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. (Matt 27:35-50)

"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here ..."

If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

Among those witnessing this event were his mother Mary, his faithful companion Mary Magdalene and other women followers, and his beloved disciple John, all desperately yearning that he would live, perhaps believing that he had the power to come down from the cross and save his own life. Yet even in the face of death Jesus could not be tempted by the devil to abandon his mission, whose sinister voice was amplified by the taunts of the shouting bystanders. He was, after all, the Son of God and he could have come down from the cross. Yet, in this final universe altering temptation, he fulfilled his God-given mission to the end. Through his final act of sacrificial love, he broke the hold of the devil over this world, paving the way for us to have a more abundant life here on earth and eternal life with our God.

Let us thank him. Let us worship him. And let us pray ...