



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Tempted by the Devil

Luke 4:1-13

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the Blessed Virgin Mary

Who is Jesus? What does it mean to be the Messiah? What does it mean to be the Son of God? And how does Jesus' identity as Messiah, as the King, as the Son of God work out as he embarks on his ministry? Questions like these were running through everyone's head, including Jesus'. Still today, having the story laid out for us in four gospels, we still wonder what all of this meant for Jesus and for his ministry. The Jews had a lot of wrong ideas and misconceptions and, even with the Scriptures given to us, *we* often *still* have wrong ideas and misconceptions.

In the early centuries after Jesus' resurrection, curious and usually well-meaning Christians tried to fill in the gaps with fanciful and sometimes downright goofy stories about Jesus working miracles during his childhood, about Mary giving away samples of his bathwater or people stealing his diapers from the clothesline because miraculous power was associated with them—so some people said. Even theologians got it wrong. The earliest heresies that the bishops dealt with in the Councils were wrong ideas that came about as Christians tried to sort out what it meant for Jesus to be both *the* Son of God (with a capital "S") and *a* son of God (with a lower-case "s")—what it meant for him to be both divine *and* human; both human *and* divine. And despite the Fathers of the Church working so hard over centuries to hammer out an orthodox biblical understanding of these things, we still struggle with them—mostly because modern Christians have so often cut ourselves off from our roots. These are the doctrines laid out in the Creeds, but many Christians today have never heard of, let alone recited the Creeds as the most basic statements of biblical Christianity. And so there are

groups that have, in their ignorance, revived many of those old heresies. But even in orthodox Christian circles, while we acknowledge that Jesus was fully God and fully human, there's a powerful tendency to downplay his humanity. There's a tendency to think of him and to portray him as a First Century Superman—one of us, but not *really* one of us. St. Luke offers us a much-needed corrective. One of his primary themes is to show us the humanity of Jesus. And Jesus' humanity is important as we've seen already. To redeem us, he had to become one of us and he had to identify with us—fully and in every way.

From the evidence, we can surmise that Jesus grew into his understanding of who he was and what he had come to do. It was at his baptism, as the Father spoke: "You are my beloved Son" and the Spirit descended to anoint him that everything Jesus had come to believe and understand about himself was confirmed. And in light of that confirmation of his mission, what Luke says happened next seems completely natural: Jesus goes into the wilderness to prepare. That preparation takes the form of forty days of prayer and fasting.

If forty days seems like a long time to pray, it's only because we pray so little. Jesus reminds us that prayer—lots of prayer!—should undergird our action in ministry and mission. It's ironic that all too often we jump into action without adequate prayer, or when we do pray, we make prayer a substitute for action—we know what God has called us to do, but we pray in the hopes that somehow he'll change his mind. That's not what Jesus is about. Jesus knew his mission; now he establishes a foundation of prayer before he sets out to accomplish it. Look at verses 1-2:

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil.

The words "wilderness" and "forty" take us back to the wilderness of Sinai and to Israel's birth as a nation. As John led the people into the wilderness to be baptised as a sign of a new exodus, Jesus now begins his ministry as the leader of the new exodus by going into

the wilderness to fast and pray for forty days. In doing this he identifies himself with Israel. Israel was God's son (small "s") and now Jesus, as God's Son (capital "S"), puts himself in Israel's place. Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit and we remember that Israel was led to the wilderness and accompanied by the Spirit, manifesting himself as a cloud by day and fire by night. And as the devil meets Jesus to tempt him in the wilderness, his three temptations parallel his temptation of Israel during her sojourn in the wilderness.

Luke gives us a sense that this is a cosmic showdown: the Holy Spirit on one hand and the devil on the other. Israel had failed. And now, as the Messiah, Jesus identifies himself with Israel. Will he succeed where Israel failed? This is how Luke sets up the story.

And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." (Luke 4:2b-3)

Luke shows us Jesus' humanity. "He ate nothing...and...he was hungry." This is no Superman. The Israelites were hungry during their time in the wilderness and Jesus identifies himself with them: he's hungry too—the natural human consequences of not eating. And so the devil appeals to Jesus' hunger. This was the wilderness. There wasn't anything to eat, but there were stones everywhere and the devil draws Jesus' attention to them and says, "If you're really the Son of God, turn these stones into bread."

Luke doesn't actually tell us whether or not the devil manifested himself to Jesus in some kind of physical form. When we consider that the devil is a spiritual being—a fallen angel—and that the point of all this is Jesus' identification with his people in our temptations, I'm inclined to take this as the devil coming to Jesus in a "spiritual" fashion—tempting him as he tempts us. This is just the sort of internal dialogue you or I might have in the same situation. In our discomfort, in our desperation, in our frustration we start to think about our

options and the devil directs our thoughts to the options that not only give us an easy out, but that also involve disobedience and compromising our faith. Whatever the case, the devil is trying to get Jesus to reject the commitment he made public in his baptism. In the Jordan, as John baptised him, Jesus had declared his commitment to God's plan—to follow his Father and the Spirit as they led him down the path of redemption for humanity. Jesus showed his obedience and his own faith as he followed the Spirit's leading into the wilderness. He knew there was no food there—only stones—but in following the Spirit, he trusted his Father to provide one way or another. The devil now tempts him to abandon that faith and to strike out on his path. The Spirit had led him to the wilderness and the devil now tempts Jesus to transform the wilderness—to defeat the Spirit's purpose for bringing him there. But in doing that, Jesus would be exchanging God's plan for his own and rejecting God's promise of provision. And so Jesus responds, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3.

And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'"

Jesus appeals to the sermon that Moses preached to the Israelites as they were preparing to march into Canaan:

And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.
(Deuteronomy 8:2-3)

There was a reason why the Lord allowed the Israelites to be hungry: it demonstrated their faith in his provision. Were they willing to trust him even

when it meant hardship? The Lord taught them that there's more to life than bread. Bread feeds our bodies, but what good is the body if the soul is lost to sin and death through disobedience? The Israelites had failed that test, grumbling against Moses and wanting to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt. Now, as he hungers in the wilderness where the Spirit has led him, Jesus passes the test as he says "No!" to temptation. He trusts his Father to provide where he has led and shows that he knows that obedience to God's call is more important than physical comforts and even life itself. What does it look like to be the Messiah? Jesus confirms that the Messiah is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, willing to endure hardship for the sake of God's plan.

Foiled on his first attempt, the devil changes tack:

And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."
(Luke 4:5-7)

Jesus knew that the Messiah's kingdom was to be universal and eternal. Gabriel had announced to Mary: "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:33). When the Father had spoken at Jesus baptism, he had spoken words from Psalm 2 where we also read of the great King:

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possessions. (Psalm 2:8)

Jesus knew his destiny as the King. He's already shown that he knows the path to his kingdom is going to be a hard path to walk. The devil now offers him a shortcut. And yet that shortcut misses the whole point of the Messiah's ministry. The Messiah's path will be a hard one because he's called to restore fallen humanity as part of the process of

ushering in his kingdom. The Messiah is to restore fallen humanity so that heaven may one day be manifest on earth. (Genesis portrays the Creation as God's cosmic temple, but what's the point of restoring the temple if there are no priests to serve in it?) The devil's shortcut offers no redemption. Instead of ruling heaven on earth, Jesus would be ruling over a hell manifest on earth. In bowing the knee to the devil, he'd be selling his birthright as the Son of God and instead becoming a son of Satan. He'd be no better off than the people he came to redeem.

Remember that in the wilderness, the Lord had commanded Israel:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.... It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you—for the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God.
(Deuteronomy 4-5, 13-15a)

Israel had failed. Even in the wilderness, while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, Aaron had led the people as they made and worshiped the golden calf. Most of Israel's history was marked by the worship of foreign gods. But Jesus responds to the devil's temptation with the command God had given through Moses:

And Jesus answered him, "It is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."
(Luke 4:8)

Where Israel failed, Jesus overcomes temptation. He chooses the hard path of obedience that will bring redemption. In doing this he stands over against all the others who had come with Messianic hopes. He stand over against the "Messiahs" who had come and who would come who thought to bring the

kingdom by rising up in violent revolution against the Romans. He stand over against Herod, who thought he could be the great Davidic King by selling out to the Romans and by seizing earthly power through compromise with pagans and false religion.

Foiled a second time, the devil makes on last attempt. Look at verses 9-11:

**And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,
“He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,’
and
“On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.”**

The devil now leads Jesus to the highest point in Jerusalem and tempts him to do something stupid as a way of forcing God into displaying his power through a spectacular rescue that everyone would see. “Jesus, if you’re the Son of God, prove it to everyone with a big show.”

Rejection was to be a constant theme of Jesus ministry. The Son of God came to save Israel, but most of Israel rejected his claims. Now in this final temptation, Luke foreshadows Jesus’ final test at the cross. There he was, the Son of God, but rejected finally by the people. He could have proved it to them by using his power to save himself, to come down from the cross in a great show of power and glory. But that wasn’t his Father’s plan and if he’d done that, the world would have known who he was, but again there would have been no redemption for sin.

The devil quotes two passages from Psalm 91. It’s a psalm about the Lord’s protection. What the devil quotes to Jesus from the psalm sounds good, but he leaves out some other important parts of the same psalm that qualify God’s provision for his people. The first two verses of the psalm read:

**He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust.”**

The shelter of the Most High is a wonderful place to find oneself, but to live under his protection requires that we first abide in his shadow. He is our “refuge and fortress”, but we put ourselves in his care as we trust in him. In verse 14 the Lord says,

**Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;
I will protect him, because he knows my name.**

“Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him.” Jesus later said, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15) We show our love for God as we live in faith, as we trust in him and walk in obedience. As the devil plucked portions of Scripture out of context in order to twist their meaning. He does the same today, reminding people of God’s promises of blessing and care, while neglecting to remind us of the need for faith, for holiness, and for obedience. He quotes Scripture to put our attention on the short-term, while leaving out the bits that give us eternal perspective. And so Jesus refuses the devil’s short-term blessings, knowing that through obedience, through humility, and even through suffering, greater blessing will be poured out on all humanity.

Jesus rebukes Satan with the words of Deuteronomy 6:16.

And Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Luke 4:12)

Again, where Israel had failed, Jesus is obedient.

These three tests represent all the other tests that Jesus will face during his ministry. Here at the beginning he proves his obedience, he demonstrates that he knows just what kind of path the

Messiah is being called to walk. Even though this showdown with the devil takes place at the very beginning of his ministry and even though Jesus will face a host of tests as during the three years that follow, none of those tests will involve anything he hasn’t already dealt with in these three. Even before he’s begun his work as Messiah, Jesus has defeated the devil. It’s a preliminary victory, but it’s still a very real victory. And so Luke says in verse 13:

And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The devil slinks away in defeat. It’s a shameful retreat. He’s got his tail between his legs, so to speak. And in his leaving, the devil concedes his own defeat. The devil will certainly return to test Jesus over and over again, but this first victory establishes Jesus as the conqueror of sin and death. Throughout the rest of his ministry there was no wavering and no doubt as he healed sickness, as he raised the dead, as he cast out demons, and as he forgave sin. He had shown that the devil had no power over him right here at the start of things. Jesus is the true Son of God. Where Adam failed, Jesus is victorious. More specifically, where Israel—who had been called to manifest God’s kingdom on the earth—where she had failed, Jesus is victorious. As he goes to the cross, he can truly be our representative. He is one of us. He has faced what we face. And yet he has been victorious where we have failed. He is fully qualified to be the spotless lamb offered for our sins.

Jesus’ temptation gives us a clearer picture of who he is and what he came to do. But more practically speaking, what can we take away from what Luke tells us here?

While it’s not likely that we will be tempted exactly the same way Jesus was, we all know the voice of temptation—whether the world, the flesh, or the devil. Every one of us has and will be tested at the points that matter most to our ministry and calling as Jesus’ people. Notice that the devil’s

three temptations here struck directly at Jesus in his role as Messiah—at his roles as Lord and Saviour. Temptation will strike directly at the calling that God has given to us too. And it's often subtle. The devil didn't direct Jesus completely off-course. He offered shortcuts. But in those shortcuts we're reminded that the *journey* God has given is as important as the destination. Jesus came as Lord to bring his kingdom. The devil offered a shortcut, but that shortcut not only offered a corrupted and upside-down kingdom, it also bypassed the road to the cross and the road to redemption for humanity. Brothers and sisters, remember that there are no shortcuts to the New Jerusalem. Christianity is not about escape from the world, but about walking in the midst of the world's darkness our whole lives long while holding high the light of Christ.

Second, the subtleness of the devil's temptation should urge us to be people steeped in the Scriptures. As we see here, he won't hesitate to quote Scripture to us. God did, in fact, make the promises that the devil quoted to Jesus. The problem is that the devil took those promises out of the context of faith and obedience. Jesus immediately saw the devil's deception. How? Because he was himself steeped in those Scriptures. He knew what the devil had left out as well as he knew what the devil quoted. He knew the big picture. And, brothers and sisters, let this be a reminder to us that the best defence against temptation, not to mention false doctrine, is a deep and full knowledge of the Scriptures.

Finally, Luke also reminds us here of the importance of obedience in our personal lives. Most of us have little trouble overcoming the temptation to engage in public and notorious sin. Our reputations are on the line. And yet when it comes to temptation to engage in sins that are secret and private, saying "No" isn't quite so easy. We can sin secretly while keeping our reputations intact. Alone in the wilderness, no one had to know that Jesus had rejected God's plan by turning stones into bread. The world, the flesh, and the devil tempt us with these secret sins all the time.

And yet a rejection of the Spirit's leading at that point would inevitably lead to other rejections of the Spirit in his life. Brothers and sisters, God poured his Holy Spirit into us in our baptism. His Spirit is working in us to make us holy and to lead us as we follow the path he's laid out for us in Scripture. And if the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, he will permeate every part, each day forming and shaping us more and more. When we sin we reject that Spiritual grace that God has poured into us. When we sin, we cut away at the union the Spirit gives us with Christ. He is the vine, we are the branches; each sin is like a blow of the axe at that place where we're joined to the vine.

In Jesus we have our motivation to obey and to strive for holiness. Not only is he the one who gave his life for us at the Cross, he is the God who humbled himself to become one with his own creatures; he is the God who humbled himself to face the devil's temptations as we do; he is the God who walked the path of suffering and shame so that we might have life again. He is the God who sought us out in love despite our rejection of him. And that amazing divine love that he has shown ought to stir up love in return in us; it ought to motivate us to loyalty and to obedience and create in us a desire to follow where he leads. Brothers and sisters, Jesus walked that hard path of temptation in the wilderness out of love for us. He now calls us to follow him. His call will take us through our own wildernesses. Again, he calls us not to escape, but to walk in the midst of darkness so that the world will see the light we bear. It's a hard path to follow, but friends, it's a joyful path to follow when we consider that he has walked it before us, that he is with us each step of the way, and that as the path has already led him to open the way to glory through the Cross, we know that so long as we continue to follow him, we will one day find our way to glory too.

Let us pray: "Lord Jesus Christ, for our sake you fasted forty days and forty nights: give us grace so to discipline ourselves that our flesh being subdued

to the Spirit, we may always obey your will in righteousness and true holiness, to the honour and glory of your name; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen."