

“Temptation”

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Based upon Luke 4:1-15; Rom. 7:14-25

Last Wednesday night, the Lenten season began. For the next forty days, we like Jesus in the wilderness strive to keep our hearts and minds focused on God and God’s way. To help with this task, some voluntarily give something up for the season—Facebook or dessert, alcohol or eating out; others add something into their routines—daily prayer or Bible study or serving others. Still others combine these ideas by adopting a practice of setting aside one material belonging per day to give away, and then donating the forty items at the end of Lent. I have tried all of the above as Lenten disciplines. How about you? These practices are not required of course. But any discipline that reorients our lives toward God is a good thing in my book because as I said on Ash Wednesday, it is easy in our culture to forget about God and try to go it alone. Whatever the spiritual mnemonic device you choose, however, keep in mind as you do it that if you really want to become more faithful during this liturgical wilderness season, like Christ, you must confront and conquer the temptations that run deep in your soul, not just the superficial cravings in your life. Jesus has shown us this in the story of his own battle with temptation, which appropriately, is the story the Lectionary assigns every year to the first Sunday of Lent.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Hebrews all state that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. It’s a core doctrine of our faith that he was tempted “as we are,” because he wouldn’t have been fully human if he wasn’t. Now *Mark* doesn’t say much about the nature of the temptations, but *Matthew* and *Luke* each record Jesus being tested in the wilderness with three challenges presented by the Devil. Since no disciples were witness to this time of testing, we can only assume that Jesus shared his experience with them at some later point to teach them how to avoid the temptations in their own lives. This is not to say that we will be tested as Jesus was. As Barbara Brown Taylor put it, “When it’s our turn none of us is going to get the Son of God test. We’re going to get the regular old Adam and Eve test, which means that the devil won’t need much more than an all-you-can-eat buffet and a tax refund to turn our heads.”¹ But the fact that Jesus shared his experience tells us that it is worth our time to ponder this story seriously.

Before we get to the temptations, it’s worth noting two things. First, according to the synoptic gospels, the Holy Spirit is the one who sent Jesus into the desert to be tested. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, heard a heavenly voice say, “This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased,” and then immediately was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. Why? Because biblically speaking, the wilderness is where Yahweh worshipers do their best spiritual work. It’s where they find out who God is, who they are, and how they are supposed to live. Before Jesus could be the Messiah, he needed to sort through these things. So, the Spirit sent him to wilderness boot camp. If we keep this in mind when we are in the wilderness, it makes it easier to learn.

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown, “*The Wilderness Exam*,” Day1.org, February 21, 2010, retrieved Mar. 4, 2019 from http://day1.org/1756-the_wilderness_exam.

Second, given that the Spirit set Jesus up, we might do better to think of the Devil in this story more as a teacher than the evil enemy of God that we tend to think of him being. The idea of the Devil being a horned, pitch-forked, evil fallen angel did not really develop until more than a millennium after Christ. According to the *Book of Job*, the Devil or Satan actually works for God to test human faithfulness. Luke may have been thinking of the Devil in this way here too because later in the Gospel, Jesus seems to concede the Devil's right to test humans when he tells Simon Peter, "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail, and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32). Our theological tradition does not recognize any entity that has equal power to God. So you can think of the Devil in this story simply as the personification of our evil inclinations, as Jewish theology thinks of Satan, or you can think of him as the cosmic equivalent of an obnoxious driving instructor who keeps telling you that your cell phone is ringing, and that the call might be very important, just to see if you will succumb to the temptation to answer it, and therefore fail your test. In other words, think of the Devil in this story as an entity that knows our worst instincts, and by appealing to them can teach us how to avoid them.

Anyway, like Moses, who went to the mountain top for forty days and nights, Jesus went out into the wilderness. Forty days signifies "a long time" in Bible-speak, and forty years, the time the Israelites spent in the wilderness, a very, very long time. Jesus did not eat anything while he was there, so he was starving. That's when the Devil showed up and began Jesus' Messiah exam. It was a crafty exam, so crafty in fact that experts don't agree about what the temptations the tests were really targeting. But by peeling the layers of interpretation back like an onion, we can discover how temptations can speak to our vulnerabilities on multiple levels.

The first popular interpretation of the temptations focuses on the desert context. Jesus was starving and sitting in the wilderness with nothing—no food, no friends, no sun screen, and in Luke's version, no evidence that God was even with him. So, the Devil magnified the threat of the scarcity by tempting him with more of what he felt he lacked. "You can have more than you could ever eat if you just change these stones," he said. "You can have more power than anyone else has over the world if you just worship me." "You can have more proof than any regular human being ever gets that God loves you if you just jump." Notice none of the temptations were bad in the sense of doing harm to others. It wouldn't hurt anyone for Jesus to make a snack. It would help his ministry to be able to have instantaneous authority over all the kingdoms, and it would help him be courageous if he knew for sure that God had his back too.

We tend to think of temptations as being so salacious or evil, but most of them have very little to do with sex or crime. In fact, when the Barna Group did a survey of the temptations that most plague Americans, you know what the top three were? The temptation to procrastinate, to overeat, and to spend too much time on media.² Most people aren't easily tempted by the really

² "New Research Explores the Changing Shape of Temptation," Barna, Jan. 25, 2013, available at <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-explores-the-changing-shape-of-temptation>.

bad stuff. But we are tempted by options that seems innocuous or even good. And that's why the temptation to seek more is so dangerous. Day in and day out we are told that more is better and what we have and are is not enough. This narrative of scarcity drives our economy; it drives the plastic surgery industry; it drives our politics and personal lives. More power, more beauty, more control, more love, more attention—we all would be happier if we just had a little more. More sells and more seduces, so the risk to us is as great as it was to Jesus. As long as we want more, we aren't focused on the abundance God has provided. We aren't focused on gratitude or trust. We're focused on what we think God has not given us that we deserve.

But wait there's more! (Just kidding). Another interpretation of Jesus' temptations is that they were all about "the quick fix." Have a hunger? Fill it. Have a job to do? Take the fastest route to success. Want proof of God's care? Get it in an instant. The only thing that we like better than "more" in our culture is "now." We want what we want instantaneously or earlier. Why wait a week for delivery when you can get it tomorrow? Why save for years for something you want, when you can charge it now? Jesus wasn't seduced by the promise of speed or the promise of more, but we are, and the evidence is everywhere: soaring debt, rising obesity and drug addiction, declining quality in craftsmanship, declining long-term research, and more and more people who are incapable of delaying gratification. Even the climate change crisis is partly a result of this. We don't want to change and potentially slow down how we live now to fix a problem that will reach its peak in the future.

Both of these levels of the temptation onion are worth seriously pondering. But it's the core of the onion that is the most thought-provoking in my opinion. You see at their core, the three temptations the Devil offered went to the heart of Jesus' understanding of himself, his calling, and his God. That's why they all began with the preamble, "If you are the Son of God..." Jesus had just had it confirmed in his baptism that he truly was the Son of God, in case he wasn't sure. But what did that mean? If he had used his divine power to make himself a sandwich, then he would be doing something for himself that regular human beings can't do. Not only would he be escaping the physical discomfort that many human beings can't escape, he would also be choosing his divine self over his human self. In order save humanity, in order to convey the message that God was incarnate and understands the challenges of human existence, Jesus needed to be the "son" in a fully human sense. So, he chose hunger and sided with humanity. Quoting a passage from *Deuteronomy* about the Exodus story, he put his trust in God's promise to care for humanity more than his divine powers.

The second temptation was one that went to the heart of his calling, by addressing how he would accomplish his mission. Jesus was called to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God on earth. He didn't come to control the kingdoms of the world, but if he did, that would have made it easier to get his message out. Thankfully, as author Arch Taylor Jr. observed, "Jesus realized that to use the world's methods to gain the world would be to become the Messiah of the world's god, not the Messiah of his Father who had sent him."³ That's why he responded by quoting

³ Taylor, Arch B., Jr., "Decision in the Desert: The Temptation of Jesus, in the Light of Deuteronomy," INTERPRETATION: A Journal of Bible and Theology, July 1, 1960, at 304.

Deuteronomy about worshiping God only. He came to proclaim the kingdom of *God*, not to be a kind of the world. Later on, he would tell his disciples, “What does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (Mark 8:36). He recognized his call was to serve God’s way, not to be served.

The last temptation cuts straight to the heart of how he came to serve and his relationship with God. Jesus came to give his life for humanity. Even before his ministry began, he must have known that it would lead to death because God’s way was not the world’s way, and because none of the prophets who had gone before him had been well-received. He knew suffering was in his future. That must have been scary for his human self to contemplate. So, although we can’t imagine being tempted to throw ourselves off a building, Jesus must have been. It was a chance to see if God would spare him from death. “Test and see if God will keep you from suffering,” the Devil said, offering him the ultimate trust fall. But Jesus didn’t fall for it. Citing a time in the desert when the Israelites tested God instead of trusting and were punished for it, Jesus chose the path of suffering and sacrifice. He chose to trust in God’s plan for him wherever that plan would lead him, even to the cross.

What can we learn from these identity and faith-challenging temptations, we who are only human and do not see crosses in our future? We can learn that the greatest of temptations are those which allow us to escape the hard challenge of being the people God made us to be. As Peter and the other disciples were all tempted in ways that perfectly suited their personalities, so are we. Maybe you are tempted to hate or judge others because of your love of righteousness. Maybe you are tempted to try to control everything, rather than trust and let go, because of your desire for goodness and perfection. Maybe you are tempted to stay with the life you know now rather than do the hard work of beginning a different one because you would rather avoid suffering. Maybe you are tempted to worry or doubt, because to trust that God is present and will help requires a level of faith in the unseen that scares you.

In the past two years in our country, when bad or crazy things have happened, which is often, people have responded “This isn’t us,” although clearly on some level it is or these things wouldn’t be happening. This is what Jesus’ temptations ask us to consider, both individually and corporately. Who are we and who were we really made to be? What are the many things we do because we are tempted by impatience or insecurity, fatigue, grief, or any number of other feelings and circumstances to behave in ways which are contrary to that identity? In twelve-step programs, they use an acronym, HALT, which stands for “hungry, angry, lonely, and tired” to remind people of the times they are most vulnerable to temptation. Those times apply for spiritual temptations too. But the time we are most vulnerable of all is when we feel we are in the wilderness because of health concerns, or job issues, or relationship problems, or because our nation is in the wilderness too. The wilderness is scary. In those moments of uncertainty and fear, it helps to have a supportive community to remind you of who you really are. It helps to remember the stories in Scripture of how others triumphed and succumbed in their own wilderness exams. But most of all, it helps to take the time and do the work to discover who and whose you are, because if you know that you are a loving person, it isn’t as tempting to hate, and if you know that you are here to serve others, then it isn’t as tempting to make everything in your

life about you, and if you know that God is with you always, it isn't as tempting to take the easy way out, or despair. We all still succumb to temptation as Paul bemoaned doing because we are not the Son of God. But knowledge of who God made us to be and calls us to be is power when it comes to resistance.

Dag Hammarskjöld once wrote, "At every moment you choose yourself. But do you choose *your* self? Body and soul contain a thousand possibilities out of which you can build many *I*'s. But in only one of them is there a congruence of the elector and the elected. Only one— which you will never find until you have excluded all those superficial and fleeting possibilities of being and doing with which you toy, out of curiosity or wonder or greed, and which hinder you from casting anchor in the experience of the mystery of life, and the consciousness of the talent entrusted to you which is your *I*."⁴ Spend these next forty days pondering your *I*, and you will not only pass your wilderness exam this Lent, you will be better equipped to stay faithful to Son of God who came to save us all. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ Hammarskjöld, Dag, Markings (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 12.