

“Tempted To...”

March 9, 2025

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Luke 4:1-13

Let me begin by setting the stage. The first one on the scene is Jesus. He is fresh off being baptized by John the Baptist. A pretty big deal as we noted last week with “the heavens opening up and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven saying, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with You I am well pleased.’” With that incredible affirmation of who Jesus was, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for an intense time of identity formation. It was time to get away from all the noise. All the noise of who His peers wanted Him to be, who He wanted to be, who society expected Him to be, who His ego or His family wanted Him to be. It was time to get away from the noise so God’s still small voice could penetrate, and He could learn who God wanted Him to be. What was He to do and be as God’s Son, sent to earth. How was He to go about it? Just like the time in the wilderness transformed Israel from Egyptian slaves into the people of God, so the wilderness would transform Jesus from the son of a Jewish carpenter who lived as a subject of the Roman empire into the presence of God serving God’s will and God’s kingdom. So on the one side, we have Jesus, guided and supported by the Holy Spirit.

On the other side we have the devil. Scripture has a very broad understanding of evil and the devil. It ranges from a selfishness from within – hear Paul’s flesh verses Spirit which is most pointedly in the Book of Romans, to a personal being outside ourselves – picture a little red devil on your shoulder much like the image in this passage. Scripture pictures evil as a powerful angel gone astray – remember the introduction to the book of Job with God talking to the devil and giving him power over Job’s circumstances, to organized forces arrayed against the will of God for the world – Matthew, Mark and Luke all record people trying to say Jesus cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub who was understood to be the ruler of the demons. Evil is even understood as an intelligent, grand, cosmic power – Ephesians 6:12 “for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Scripture agrees with experience that there is in us and among us strong opposition to love, health, wholeness, and peace. And being committed to the way of God in the world does not exempt us from the struggle with evil and its voices. In fact, it intensifies the struggle because we are actively working against these powers. Personally, I am a yes person here. If you were to ask me which one of these images best explains evil’s presence in our world, I would say “yes”. There is no need to try and differentiate the different images, sources and domains of evil in our world. I have witnessed it in all these places. From inside me to organized efforts way beyond me. There are powers working against God’s order. These are the characters in our story: Jesus filled with the Holy Spirit and the devil backed by evil.

Like I already said, the Spirit's goal in bringing Jesus out into the wilderness is identity formation. To get Jesus away from all the noise to be able to hear God's still small voice and transform His thinking and moving from being the son of a carpenter to being the Son of God. And the devil's goal is to interrupt that transformation, to keep Jesus thinking and acting like the son of a carpenter. The interruptions begin by trying to get Jesus to stop listening and start looking out for His own personal, physical needs and desires first. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." There is no evil intent or outcome from this first temptation. I read a story this week about a guy whose daughter was approaching the time for her bat mitzvah, which is the Jewish ceremony of a young girl becoming an adult with full rights and responsibilities in the Jewish faith. One day she asked her father what was wrong about eating pepperoni pizza. She had encountered that particular delicacy at slumber parties in the homes of non-Jewish friends. "God made pigs just like God made sheep. What's so wrong about eating pork?" She loved arguments. So did her dad. "That's a good question," he told his daughter. "You'll have to find an answer." His daughter had hoped for an argument, and she got a research project. She went to slumber party after slumber party, and came home smelling of pepperoni, pulled pork, and bacon. Especially bacon. One day (about when she should have been beginning to learn her "law portion" for the bat mitzvah service), she came to her father and announced her results. "I have concluded that there is nothing wrong with pork," she said. "God made it, and it tastes wonderful." Her dad was not surprised, but he was a bit nervous. "There is nothing bad about pork," she repeated, "but there is a great deal that is good about learning to control yourself. When I smell pepperoni pizza, I will remember that I am a Jew, and I will control myself."

There is nothing wrong with Jesus turning a stone into a loaf of bread. It is not like stones are good and bread is bad. "There is nothing bad about pork" and there is nothing bad about bread. There is nothing wrong with buying a luxury car or house or plane. There is nothing wrong with wanting what others have or having sex outside of marriage or treating others like they treat you. That is the temptation – to make it about the pork or about the bread, or the person or the activity – that is the temptation. It is not about them. Jews refraining from pork is not about the pork. Catholics refraining from meat on Fridays is not about the meat. Protestants getting up and going to worship is not about how worship feeds them. Christians helping people in need is not about the people in need. It is about you. It is about whose voice you are going to follow – who is going to be the authority in your life? Are you going to be the daughter of the God of Abraham or the daughter of pepperoni?

Next the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and said, "To You I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If You, then, will worship me, it will all be Yours." Now, personally, I think that is a lie. I don't think the devil has been given authority over all the kingdoms of the world. But that doesn't matter. We are still tempted by things we know are lies. Wealth, popularity, looks, power, and influence

all make the same promise. If I was just that, I would have arrived. I would have it all. I would be happy and fulfilled. We know it's not true, but they are still tempting. But it comes back to the same question, "Who are you? Whose are you?" It is not about what the devil is offering – whether it is a lie or real or good or bad. It is about you. Are you going to be a child of God or a child of this world? Whose voice are you going to listen to? Who is going to be the authority in your life?

They move away from the wilderness for the 3rd temptation. This time the devil takes Jesus to the highest point of the temple, one of the tallest buildings of its day. He says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here and God will catch You." Jesus almost had to laugh at this one. First, Jesus says, "I don't do party tricks. I live my faith so God can see. That is the only audience I am interested in." Second, devil, you seem to be missing the point. I am out here to learn to listen to God and follow who God wants Me to be, and you are asking me to boss God around – to make God listen to me by telling God when and where and how God needs to show up to serve me. That is too messed up to simply be putting the cart before the horse. That is like putting the cart before the space shuttle. It is not about a show of power anymore than it is about the lie or the bread. To focus on those is the temptation and Jesus will not fall for that. It is about who do you follow? Who do you want to impress? Do you want the people at church to say, "Wow, that was amazing" or do you want God to say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant." Are you going to be a child of God or a child of this world? Whose voice you are going to follow? Who is going to be the authority in your life?

When you listen to the voices of this world you will have bread for a meal, a moment of hope, even though it turns out to be based on a lie, and the potential for 15 minutes of fame. Or you can listen to the One who gave His life that you might live, the One who shares love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; the One who shows you the way to abundant life here on earth and eternal life with God after we die. Whose voice will you follow? Who will you be?

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