

SCRIPTURE

Luke 4:1-13

The Temptation of Jesus

4 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 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. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 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. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'"

9 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, 10 for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,'

11 and

'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

MESSAGE: Deception

The temptation of Jesus.

Doesn't it strike you right from the very beginning that this is an odd story?

The placement is odd - as we read through the gospel of Luke we move directly from Jesus' baptism and the great voice from heaven saying 'This is my son, in whom I am well pleased' directly to banishment and privation.

Does that seem a little harsh to you? 'I love you, now off you go into the scorching sun with no food, no friends. Go be alone for a while.'

Jesus didn't have a choice in the matter either. Luke wrote that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. It sounds nice, doesn't it? Brings us images of dad taking our hand and leading us down the driveway and out into the world.

The gospel of Mark says Jesus was driven into the wilderness. Εκβαλλω - it means to cast out - the same word used when Jesus casts out evil spirits.

Whichever version we read, one thing is clear. Jesus had no choice in the matter. He was led, he was driven, he was cast out. And after a good long time baking in the sun - hungry, parched, and probably a little crazy by this time - Jesus was faced with temptation.

Now, without going any further into the text we've already received a valuable lesson.

Often when we consider our own temptations we start to beat ourselves up. We see the presence of temptation as evidence of weak character or a lack of faith. We shouldn't be tempted because we're all super-Christians; we're devout, disciplined, and determined. The devil has no foothold here.

But the simple lesson here is that if even Jesus, Son of Man, Son of God, experiences temptation, then we should certainly expect to. And far from being evidence of moral weakness, temptation is the crucible in which strength is forged.

We don't become strong Christians by avoiding temptations. We want to avoid *succumbing* to them, but we don't avoid the temptations themselves. Think of the strongest people you know. They are the ones who have faced lots of trials and temptations, and have survived them. We grow as Christians, not by avoiding temptations, but by going through them to the other side.

Do you know the kind of people who aren't tempted? Those who are so far into the world that they satisfy every little desire as it arises. There can be no temptation if there is no resistance. The very fact that you recognize temptation is a testament to the Spirit of God within you. So don't be discouraged when temptation comes; it doesn't mean you are weak, it means that you are on the right track. You are right where you need to be.

That is not to say that experiencing temptation necessarily becomes easy or pleasant, though it can be so. I remember one experience of quitting smoking – I had to try quite a few times before it finally stuck. Anyone who has gone through a similar experience will be able to relate; the craving is a constant needle in the side. Whatever I would be doing there would be a persistent voice saying ‘have a cigarette have a cigarette have a cigarette.’ Literally thousands of times a day I would have to say ‘no. no. no. no.’ It’s exhausting and it wears you down. That is why I usually relapsed – just to shut that voice up for at least five minutes.

Anyway, one of the times when I quit – and this one lasted nine months – I felt that voice of temptation differently. I no longer associated the pain and the craving with myself – I wasn’t suffering. The pain was that of the little monster inside me. Every craving was a sign that the monster was suffering – they were death cries.

And so it got to the point that I actually enjoyed the cravings and temptations because it meant that I was winning; the monster was dying. It was a sweet pain.

But that was an aberration for me; most of the time I find temptation to be challenging. That’s because temptations are opportunities for transformation. And let’s be honest: most of us are resistant to any kind of change. Our lives are comfortable, safe, predictable. Tuna on Tuesdays, walk the dog every day at 11, do the big crossword on Saturday mornings. We don’t want to move, we don’t want to change, other than maybe a little more money or a little better health.

But we don’t choose our times of transformation. We are driven there. Death, failure, loss of a job, loss of reputation, broken relationships – all these things drive us into the wilderness where we have to assess who we are and what we are made of. These are times in which we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit and guided by the word so that we can return to our communities stronger and with a greater sense of purpose.

So don’t be discouraged by trials and temptations. These experiences will transform you into a greater likeness of God.

Now Jesus’ temptations were pretty obvious – he was out in the wilderness with Satan. It’s pretty clear to all what was going on. However, it is not always so. Satan is referred to as the deceiver, and with good reason.

In the desert the deceiver suggested to the starving Jesus that he use his power to change a rock into a loaf of bread. That’s not a bad thing. Food is necessary, and during Jesus’ ministry he did a few miracles with loaves of bread. Why not start a little earlier?

Satan’s other temptations were likewise good things. He offered to Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth. Isn’t that good? Who would we prefer to be in charge – the Prince of Hell or the Prince of Heaven?

The third temptation was for Jesus to jump from one of the temple parapets and have angels bear him up before the crowds. This would definitively prove to all that Jesus was the son of the most high God, and wasn't that one of Jesus' big problems during his ministry – that people didn't understand or believe who he was?

In all three temptations Satan tried to entice Jesus with something good, and this is one of the difficulties with temptation. Rarely is it a clear choice between good and evil. Very often temptation comes in the form of something good that is somewhat perverted. It is often a good thing, but not done in the right way, or not done for the right reasons.

Satan was trying to convince Jesus to do good things, but for the wrong reasons; for personal gain. Several times in Jesus' ministry he plainly said 'I do these things and say these things to glorify God.' Temptation would have Jesus do those very same good things to glorify himself. The distinction is subtle, but crucial.

There is a deception embedded within many temptations that can make it difficult for us to recognize that we are being tempted at all. Hold this thought – we will come back to it very soon.

We can see that there is a second deception in play that further confuses the issue. We are all familiar with the idea of being tempted at the point of our weaknesses, but how about being tempted at the point of our strengths?

Going back to my smoking example, it was pretty clear to me that cigarettes were bad for me, and that I had a weakness, an addiction. I could recognize that temptation pretty easily, though that didn't keep from repeatedly succumbing to it.

But we can also be tempted in our areas of strength as well. We can use our good looks, smooth tongue, physical strength, financial resources, political and social influence for our own benefit, or for the benefit of some small select group. This becomes harder to identify, often we can be blithely oblivious to the fact that we are even being tempted at all.

I had one of those moments this week. It's been a busy few weeks, and things are getting even busier. I usually put 10-12 hours into researching and writing a good sermon – there's a lot of wrestling that goes on before I even write a single word.

I've preached on temptation before. I've got a pretty good sermon from a couple of years back that would fit quite well this morning. I'm sure most of you wouldn't remember the original, and it was probably good enough that it bears repeating anyway.

There is good mixed up with the temptation. It plays to what I consider to be a strength – writing decent sermons. Why not reuse what I already poured so much time and effort into? It would free up some of my time to catch up with some of the congregational visits that I've been putting off because I'm so busy. It's all good, right?

The problem is that it's all in service of me. Reusing that older sermon would make my life easier. It's not really for you, nor is it for God.

This is the deception of temptation. Take something good, but do it the wrong way.

This brings me to what I perceive to be one of the worst deceptions of our time. It is a temptation that so many people are falling for because they don't think that it's even a temptation.

That's because it has both elements of deception firmly embedded within it – it is what we would consider a good thing, and it connects with us on a point of strength.

That great evil, the great deception, is fascism. It didn't disappear after the second world war, it merely went underground where it metastasized, and we are now seeing it again.

The thing that makes this deception so complete is that we are witnessing fascism arise from both sides of the political spectrum at once, and each side is oblivious to their own contribution.

To be clear, when I speak of fascism I am referring to an authoritarian political system in which the dominant voice has complete control. No opposing opinion is tolerated; no criticism is allowed. This is the road that our society is heading down right now.

The good that both sides are seeking is the wellbeing and protection of people.

On the right people are trying to protect a way and standard of life that they feel is being threatened by immigrants, refugees, and people who don't share the same values as them.

On the left people are trying to protect groups that they perceive as marginalized – those very same immigrants, refugees, and people with different values.

Both sides are trying to protect something, and both sides are further deceived because the temptation appeals to what they consider a strength – their righteousness. This temptation to moral interference is being felt across the globe; there is a battle going on right now to determine what will be the dominant narrative and it will affect generations.

The trouble is that we haven't recognized that this is a temptation. We're like the chickens, with our eyes on the ground. We're so busy arguing over whether gay people should be ministers, or what kind of sex education we should teach in school that we've failed to see that no matter what we decide the end result is domination.

Any time that we trample the rights of one group of people in the name of another group of people we are all diminished. It makes no difference if we are oppressing outsiders to keep

things running smoothly at home, or we're oppressing voices at home in the name of a marginalized minority that is among us. Oppression is oppression.

To paraphrase Neimoller:

They came for the immigrants – but we're not immigrants, we didn't care.

They came for the proliferers – we didn't care.

They came for the lesbians – we didn't care.

They came for the dominant class – we didn't care.

When they finally came for us – there was nobody left to care.

Identity politics is deadly. It is a politics of division. It goes against fifty years of feminism and fighting for equality. It's also unbiblical. While we fight over which groups we should favour over the others the bible tells us that our categories have no validity. There is no longer Greek or Jew, male or female. That means that when we trample on the rights of a few, we are weakening the rights of everyone.

We are being played by Satan, we are succumbing to temptation because we don't even recognize that it is temptation. Anytime you start thinking that the end justifies the means, you are being tempted.

And remember that temptation is the crucible in which your character is formed. Trials and temptations lead us to growth, and to transformation. But not if we don't recognize them. Not if we are deceived into thinking that we are the only righteous ones, and 'those other guys' are the ones being misled.

Jesus came that all would be free, that all would have life and have it abundantly. Not just some; not just us; not just the ones we favour. All.

As we enter Lent, some among us will be giving up temptations like chocolate or coffee. I invite you this Lent to instead give up the temptation to believe that our side, whichever side that may be, is always right. There is no 'our side' – that is deception. There are only human beings. I invite you to give up the temptation that some people are more worthy than others, because again, there are only human beings. I invite you to give up the temptation that we automatically know which voices deserve to be silenced.

I invite you, this Lent, to recognize the wiles of the devil, and by growing through the temptations before us to become transformed by the love of Christ.