

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 91:9-12
SECOND LESSON: Luke 4:1-13
February 6, 2022

“The Nature of Temptation”
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Four pastors were spending a week together on retreat at a cabin. In the evening they decided to tell each other their biggest temptation. The first pastor said, “Well, it’s kind of embarrassing, but my big temptation is bad pictures. Once I even bought a copy of the *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Edition.”

“My temptation is worse,” said the second pastor. “It’s gambling. One Saturday instead of finishing my sermon I went to the race track to bet on the horses.”

“Mine is worse still,” said the third pastor. “I sometimes can’t control the urge to drink. One time I actually got drunk in church on a Sunday afternoon.”

The fourth pastor was quiet. “Brothers, I hate to say this,” he said, “but my temptation is worst of all. I love to gossip - and if you guys will excuse me, I’d like to make a few phone calls!”

We all experience temptation. And it wouldn’t be temptation if we didn’t really, really want to do it! The best way to handle it, however, is to not give it any space to flourish. Most of us have used the distraction technique of shaking a set of keys before an infant intent on destructive behavior. It’s amazing how quickly they will give up on their plan to stick a fork in an electric socket in favor of shiny keys. What we tend to forget is that as adults we need to do the same thing with ourselves. Don’t dwell on that thought, abandon it quickly. Don’t “romance the drink.” Don’t rationalize the gambling. Don’t say, “just this once” to anything. And for heaven’s sake, don’t keep chocolate in the house. I speak from experience.

Luke’s gospel tells us that Jesus left the Jordan where he had just been baptized by John and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness was on a different magnitude than ours, and yet the devil was still targeting basic human weaknesses.

The wilderness is a specific region—an arid place between the fertile populated areas and desert. Things grew in the wilderness. Wild animals lived in the wilderness. But it was not a place that could consistently sustain life, producing food for flocks only during rainy periods. Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness echoes the forty years the people spent following Moses in the wilderness. And of course, the same number—40—is used throughout scripture. Moses spent forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai without food

or water (Exodus 34:28). Elijah journeyed forty days without food (1 Kings 19:8).

We are literalist. We think 40 means 40. I remember hearing a preacher speak in Scotland who actually did a 40 day fast. But the number 40 just means “a long time” or “a lot.” I am reminded of the way that trolls count in Terry Pratchett’s discworld series. “One, two, many, lots.” That’s about where my math skills are. Jesus was in the wilderness A LONG TIME. How long? We have no idea. But the devil was tempting him the entire time, and after his long fast, the devil turned up the pressure.

The stones in the wilderness region strongly resemble the round loaves of bread made at the time of Jesus. They *looked* like bread. So it would make sense that the devil would try to tempt Jesus to turn them into bread. But this temptation and the last one also began with a taunt. They start with “If you are the Son of God.” The devil says ““If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” “If you are” strikes at the heart of Jesus’ identity. And “if you are” is also a very potent tool in the hands of anyone wanting to manipulate us. “If you are really my friend . . . if you are a team player . . . if you are a real Christian. “If you are” can trick us into doing a lot of things we shouldn’t do because it taps into our insecurity. We want to prove ourselves. But there is no proving anything to a liar and manipulator and Jesus knew this. So when the devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread,” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”

The next temptation was power. The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours.” This statement is, of course, both true and false. Like a powerful mafia drug cartel leader in a poor country the devil does run a lot of things in our world. The real government often seems powerless, and those who take a stand against the corruption are often assassinated. The cartel calls the shots, even though they have no legal right to do so. This is the world we live in. There is a constant battle between good and evil. But the devil dared to attempt to seduce Jesus into surrendering his real authority as the Son of God for the false authority of raw power, self-aggrandizement and ego.

It did not work. Once more Jesus used scripture saying, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

The final temptation is not one I would be tempted by, because I would not have the confidence that I would be saved by angels. I would fully expect to fall and die. Jumping off the highest point of the Temple would terrify me, not tempt me! The devil led Jesus to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written: “‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

The devil knows scripture—better than we do. But the devil knows scripture in order to weaponize it. The devil twists scripture and deliberately takes things out of context. The promise in this psalm was not to be taken

literally, and it was not for the Messiah. This was a general psalm of praise about God's faithfulness. The psalm is about God's faithfulness—and the temptation was to be unfaithful by putting God to the test. The people of Israel tested God again and again. They quarreled. They demanded God do things. Putting God to the test is not an honorable thing to do. This temptation is really twisted, because by taking this scripture out of context the devil both accuses Jesus of not trusting scripture, **and** of not being who he said he was.

When someone tempts us to do wrong and we give in to that temptation, we have given that person control over us. And if Jesus had given in to any of the devil's temptations he would have surrendered himself to the devil. The incarnation would have failed. The power of human flesh would have been deemed too powerful for God to overcome. Everything hung in the balance.

Jesus didn't engage in debate with the devil. He didn't entertain the temptation set before him as a viable option. He didn't give it any space to grow. Instead, he cut it off using scripture. Jesus knew scripture, vast, vast portions of scripture by heart. That is what people do in an illiterate culture—they memorize. Jesus could read both Hebrew and Aramaic, but he also grew up memorizing huge swaths of scripture. The more dependent we have become on the written word and technology, the less our ability to memorize. We used to know everyone's phone numbers by heart because we had to. Now we can't even remember our own! But our inability to take these things in and commit them to memory has weakened us in our stand against evil. We need to know what scripture says, and we need to know it in context, because there are always people out there ready, willing and able to twist it. Very few of us read and study scripture on a regular basis, and this is a mistake, because it leaves us open to being deceived.

It is the nature of temptation to grind away at our hearts and minds. Rarely is it an obvious assault. Usually, temptation begins in very subtle ways. We find ourselves focused on our own physical needs and desires. We feed resentment with what we think about and talk about and become increasingly blind to our own faults. We throw in a little self-righteousness justification. The more space we give temptation in our heads the greater the power it has over us. We can set ourselves up for anything. Adultery doesn't happen out of the blue. A relapse on alcohol or drugs doesn't jump out of nowhere. We mentally prepare ourselves to give in to temptation. And "just saying no" as Nancy Reagan once proposed does not really work. We need to replace the temptation—immediately—with something else. The unhealthy must be replaced by the healthy, the self-indulgent by self-giving, the appeal to pride by humility, the lie by truth. And the right use of scripture slams the door shut faster than anything else, because darkness disappears in the light. Amen.

- ⁹ If you say, “The Lord is my refuge,”
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
¹⁰ no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.
¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
¹² they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

Luke 4:1-13

- ⁴ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.
³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”
⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”
⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours.”
⁸ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”
⁹ The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is written:
“He will command his angels concerning you
to guard you carefully;
¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”
¹² Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”
¹³ When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.