

February 18, 2018

*"Temptation"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 4:1-13

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I've got a video I'd like to show you. Let's watch.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDqRheBu2cg>

Now my guess is that most of us here hardly ever give much thought to the devil and his ways. Perhaps because we're far too sophisticated to believe that such a congenial fellow, in a cute red outfit, with little horns and a pitchfork, could really pose a problem for us. And yet, consider for a minute, the truth of some of the things he alluded to in the video – which applies not only in churches, but in our homes, our workplaces, our lives. Things like – how he likes to tempt us with that cookie – that pleasure. How he likes to divide us. How he likes to appeal to our sense of pride and power. Does that worry us? Or, maybe he already has part of us, convincing us he's not a threat, that we've got nothing to worry about. In many ways our attitude toward the devil may be like that familiar story of the old Arab sleeping in his tent in the desert. He wakes up hungry, lights his lamp, and finds his bowl of dried figs. When he picks up the first fig he sees a worm in it, so in disgust, he throws it away. Then he takes out a second fig, and sees another worm in that one, so he throws it away as well. At that point, the old Arab decides to turn out his lamp. He then proceeds to eat the whole bowl of figs. You see, sometimes ignoring the obvious is a less disturbing alternative.

But let me assure you, the devil and his evil is real. The Apostle John calls Satan the "father of lies," for he fights deceptively, using every clever trick in his book to entrap us and make us slaves to sin. And in today's Scripture, we see how the devil has the boldness to take on even Jesus Christ. Let's look again. Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan River, and the Holy Spirit leads him out into the wilderness for forty days to fast, to pray, and to prepare himself for his ministry to the world. And along comes the devil tempting Jesus while he's in his weakened state – challenging him and testing him on matters pertaining to his faith and trust in Almighty God.

Now just how does he tempt Jesus? Well first, the devil tempts Jesus by appealing to his most basic need... food. Luke tells us that Jesus "ate nothing at all and was famished." So here he was, starving and weak, and the devil says, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." And think about it. Isn't this the easiest way the devil gets us to turn away from God and the

teachings of our faith? By telling us it's okay to put not only our physical needs first, but also our earthly needs and desires. That it's okay to put our conveniences, our work schedules, our personal relationships, even emails, television shows, household duties, sports and other activities first and foremost, before our prayers, our worship, our study. Any of those things that "whet our appetite" and come before God. But Jesus answers the devil, "It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God." You see, Jesus put God first, trusting that God would sustain him, and keep him strong.

Now the second temptation Satan taunts Jesus with has to do with worshipping the false gods of this world rather than the one, true, God. Satan does this by appealing to our prideful nature, our ego. Author and theologian C.S. Lewis says that pride is the greatest sin. And just imagine for a moment. Here's Jesus, knowing his journey will lead to death on the cross. Knowing the humiliation, pain and suffering he will experience. And for what? For a fallen and ungrateful humankind. So Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and all their glory, and promises that Jesus can have complete power and authority over them if he would only worship Satan. Power and prestige is a tantalizing thought, isn't it? Especially for us, especially in a culture that reveres these gods. A culture that reinforces the notion that we are entitled to everything we can get, even at the expense of the other guy. But God's word tells us that we are not to worship these false gods, that we are to have an attitude of humility. And so, we must answer those temptations that appeal to our prideful nature just as Jesus answered the devil: "It is written, worship the Lord your God and serve only Him."

And finally, the devil tempts Jesus by making him question his trust in God and God's plan, by trying to get Jesus to make God prove himself. The devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and basically tells him to test God. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down and God will command his angels to protect you. God will not let your foot be dashed against a stone." And don't we succumb to this temptation when we question and blame God when trials or troubles befall us, when difficulties come our way? Don't these things make us angry and bitter toward God? So we test God, saying in effect, "If you really cared, you wouldn't let this happen to me." You would protect me and not let my "foot be dashed against a stone." But remember when we discussed two weeks ago the Scripture about Jesus and the disciples caught out at sea in a storm. What was his promise? Do not be afraid! Do not be afraid! In this difficult and imperfect world, we are going to be in for some rough times. We have to accept that. And, we need to have faith that trust – trusts that if we fail now, God can and will bring us

greater success in his timing. Trust that though we suffer and feel broken, God will bring us to greater wholeness. Trust that though the realities of life can bring us down, God will lift us higher. Trust that, though we will die, we will enter in to life everlasting. When we put our faith and trust in God, it honors God, and he showers us with his good graces. And so, no matter what happens to us, we must keep our resolve and answer as Jesus did, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

These are powerful lessons we can learn from Jesus. But there's one other thing we can take away from this Scripture. And you'll find it to be paradoxical. Because you may think that the deeper one's relationship is to God, the lesser would be the influence of the devil and temptation. Quite the contrary. Just consider – here's Jesus after his baptism, filled with the Holy Spirit, told by Almighty God that "you are my beloved son," and immediately he is tempted. Yes, even Jesus Christ is tempted. The fact is, there is no one more desirable to Satan than one who has given his or her life over to God and is committed to God. You see, there is an ongoing spiritual battle being fought. And Jesus, and the temptations he suffered in the wilderness, are a reminder that the righteous life we try to lead will always be juxtaposed to our struggle with sin and temptation. For all of us will face temptation in our lives.

Let me close with a story about a woman who was tempted during a very difficult time in her life, but instead chose to do what Jesus did - to put personal sacrifice before desire, humility before pride, and faith before doubt, relying on God and God's word. Most of you have heard of Adam Hamilton, pastor of the largest United Methodist Church in the country, and author of our Lenten study, “Creed.” He tells about a woman who wrote him a letter saying that she got pregnant at seventeen while still in high school, and when her father found out, he was furious. This was before abortion was legal in the United States, so he set up an appointment with a doctor in Switzerland, and was going to fly her there for the procedure. She refused saying she wanted to get married and have the baby. Her father said she would never again be welcomed in their home if she went through with it, but she held firm. She and her boyfriend married, and then had to drop out of high school to care for the baby. They struggled financially, and after twelve years, divorced. Adam said, “I wondered if this woman regretted her decision.” But her letter concluded in this way: ‘Yes, my life changed dramatically due to the pregnancy, but to this day, that child has been the greatest blessing to me and thousands of others. I am so proud of the husband and father he has become. So many times when I look at him I think...this person could have ended up aborted, but instead, due to the classes in Sunday School week after week

that had been taught to me as a child, I knew that even from the very moment that he was conceived, he was a gift from God. I look back sometimes at the college that I missed, and the experiences that “could have been,” but I wouldn’t change it for anything. Thank you, Adam, for being my “gift from God.” I never dreamed 36 years ago while I was carrying you that you would have the impact on God’s people, and me, that you do. You are my pastor, my confidant and my best friend. I love you, Mom.’ Yes, that was his mother’s story, and he was that child.

Yes, there will be hard choices we have to make in life. An sometimes the answers are different for different people. But the fact is, each of us will face our own wilderness, and we must be prepared. For the temptations we face in this life will be great. But God is greater. Amen