

Testing 1, 2, 3  
A Sermon by Dr. William D. Peterson  
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church  
February 21, 2010  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

Text: Luke 4:1-13

New International Version

The Temptation of Jesus

<sup>1</sup> Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, <sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'<sup>[a]</sup>"

<sup>5</sup> The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. <sup>7</sup> So if you worship me, it will all be yours."

<sup>8</sup> Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> For it is written: " 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;

<sup>11</sup> they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

<sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

The Sermon

Only two of the four gospels give the long version of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. John leaves it out altogether and Mark's gospel covers the whole thing in two sentences: the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, he was there forty days, Satan tempted him, wild beasts kept him company, and angels waited on him. That's it; that's all Mark knew--or that's all he thought we needed to know--about what happened between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness.

Anyone who remembers more than that is remembering Matthew or Luke, because those are the only two who go into any detail about what the devil said and what Jesus said back. What this dialog proves among other things is that the devil is biblically literate. He knows exactly where to find the Bible verses he needs to put Jesus to the test, but Jesus knows more than what the Bible says. Jesus knows how to do what the Bible says, which is how he passes his wilderness exam.

But, whether we are mindful of the "long," or the "short" versions of the story of the temptation of Jesus, do you find it as remarkable as I do that the same Jesus who

taught his disciples how to pray – saying, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” – is reported as being led in Matthew and Luke; and being driven in Mark, by the Holy Spirit of all things, to be tempted by of all supernatural beings, the devil! ?

Further, what is going on, given that Jesus was not at wits end, or floundering in his faith at this point, but rather full of the Holy Spirit?

There is a fair amount of agreement among New Testament scholars that the temptation accounts are more symbolic -- and are more likely to be statements of theology, rather than accounts of history, but there is no disagreement that they represent the gospel writers' conviction that leading a Spirit-filled life is no fire-wall against temptation. This makes sense, because so much of the symbolism of the temptation stories have parallels to the trials and tribulations faced by ancient Israel after it was selected by God to be God's distinctive people.

That a man or woman filled with the Spirit is sent on a special period of testing prior to beginning ministry is not surprising. Consider the tradition in so many cultures of sending young people on a walkabout, or on a vision quest, prior to their admission into the tribe with adult or warrior status. I don't know that this tradition was in place in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, but certainly the silent and solitary retreat is a vital discipline for many people of faith across cultures, and Jesus is depicted throughout his ministry as relishing times alone to commune with God.

But to commune with the devil? – with Satan? That's quite a twist, isn't it?

And just who is this demonic creature who, in Matthew's Gospel, even quotes Scripture to seek to get Jesus to bow down to him, rather than to stay true to his heavenly father?

Through most all of the Old Testament, the Satan is simply a generic term for adversary, or the accuser, and was even used in court settings to describe hostile witnesses or the prosecutor.

The term did not become a personification of evil until after all of the Old Testament had been written, and it was not until after the Babylonian exile -- a few centuries before Jesus' birth -- that the accuser takes on a particular identity as one of the angels in the heavenly court, the divine prosecuting attorney who presses God's case, or does God's work of probing the integrity of human beings.

It was during the time between the final writings of what became the Hebrew Bible and our Old Testament, and the time of the writings of the New Testament that the figure of Satan emerged in the Jewish tradition as the personification of evil and the transcendent opponent of God. If you have access to a Bible which includes the Apocrypha, you'll find such references. But Jewish monotheism prohibited Satan from becoming a second god, so he became described as the leader of all evil spirits, with his own kingdom of darkness opposing the kingdom of God.

Thus we need to be careful in the ways we depict Satan and Satan's power, to avoid presuming an equal power – or in some cases an even greater power – exists, that is opposed to God, and before whom we are but pawns, in spite of Flip Wilson's comic character who shrilly proclaimed "The devil made me do it!" or Dana Carvey's character The Church Lady on Saturday Night Live who would say, "Was it Satan?"

Whether the forces of evil are equal to God or not, we do, however, have to choose whether we are going to collude with the darker side, or the lighter side. We do have to choose whom we will serve.

Jesus' choice is clear, in response to each of the three temptations. He is not going to let Satan have the upper hand, tempting as that might be. But even Jesus, who has been presented prior to this as the beloved Son of God, must give a defense as to why he will not yield to Satan's wiles, and, isn't it fascinating that Jesus' defense was to consistently quote Scripture.

Jesus did not rely on his own authority.

Jesus did not run to his heavenly father for support.

Jesus did demonstrate a knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and, in response, the Satan figure ultimately backed off until another day. Notice, however, that Luke does not say that Jesus was rid of temptation once and for all. He was merely rid of the tempter "for a season."

So, what are we to learn from this temptation story. Is it just about Jesus?

If it is only about Jesus, then we fail to learn the importance of testing in our own lives. And clearly, it is not likely that we are going to necessarily know that we are in a wilderness environment, being tempted by the ultimate Tempter himself or herself. We are likely to be caught unawares and, as often as not, be the victim of the way our own minds work.

Take this story, for example. It comes to us from a book by the title The Wisdom of the Zen Masters.

Two monks on a pilgrimage came to the ford of a river. There they saw a girl dressed in all her finery, obviously not knowing what to do since the river was high and she did not want to spoil her clothes. Without more ado, one of the monks took her on his back, carried her across and put her down on dry ground on the other side.

Then the monks continued on their way. But the other monk after an hour started complaining, "Surely it is not right to touch a woman; it is against the commandments to have close contact with women. How could you go against the rules for monks?"

The monk who had carried the girl walked along silently, but finally he remarked, "I set her down by the river an hour ago, why are you still

carrying her?"

So, fellow believers – each on your own pilgrimage -- who, or what, are you carrying (am I carrying) as a source of distraction and temptation, bitterness or regret, long after the incident or incidents have ended?

And what choices are you making – choices that need to be made well before the time of testing – choices made well before the actual testing, that either help prepare us to withstand – or incline us to succumb – to the trials we face?

We are all aware of the “Just Say No!” campaign related to drug use. Well, here are some other “no’s” that are vitally important to believers of all ages and proclivities.

We say "No" to the powers and principalities of this world, by saying "Yes" to the ultimate power and authority, God. In fact, the necessary no cannot be invoked without the affirming yes. Jesus said no to the Devil because he had already said yes to the Father. Jesus said no to the seductive words of the tempter because he said yes to the authority of Scripture.

You say to your child no, you cannot play in the street. That necessary no is only possible because you, as a loving parent, have already said yes to your commitment to safeguard the health of your child.

You say no to drugs because you have said yes to clean living.

You say no to revenge because you have said yes to forgiveness.

You say no to temptation because you have said yes to self-control.

You say no to Satan because you have said yes to the Spirit.

You say no to racism or homophobia or other prejudices because you have said yes to love.

You say no to oppression because you have said yes to justice.

You say no to crankiness because you have said yes to kindness.

You say no to peer pressure because you have said yes to maintaining your self-respect.

Pastor Max Lucado’s writings have been an inspiration to thousands, and a list of resolutions, excerpted from his book, WHEN GOD WHISPERS YOUR NAME, (Word, 1994) has certainly been a source of inspiration to me.

Lucado writes:

It's early. The sky is still black. The world is still asleep.

In a few moments the day will arrive. It will roar down the track with the rising sun. The stillness of the dawn will be exchanged for the noise of the day. The calm and solitude will be replaced by the pounding pace of the human race. The refuge of the early morning will be invaded by decisions to be made and deadlines

to be met.

For the next 12 hours I will be exposed to the day's demands. It is now that I must make a choice. Because of Calvary, I am free to choose.

I choose love. No occasion justifies hatred; no injustice warrants bitterness. I choose love. Today I will love God and what God loves.

I choose joy. I will invite my God to be the God of circumstance. I will refuse the temptation to be cynical, the tool of the lazy thinker. I will refuse to see people as anything less than human beings, created by God. I will refuse to see any problem as anything less than an opportunity to see God.

I choose peace. I will live forgiven. I will forgive so that I may live.

I choose patience. I will overlook the inconveniences of the world. Instead of cursing the one who takes my place, I'll invite him to do so. Rather than complain that the wait is too long, I will thank God for a moment to pray.

I choose kindness. I will be kind to the poor, for they are alone. Kind to the rich, for they are afraid. And kind to the unkind, for such is how God has treated me.

I choose goodness. I will go without a dollar before I take a dishonest one. I will be overlooked before I will boast. I will confess before I will accuse.

I choose faithfulness. Today I will keep my promises. My debtors will not regret their trust. My associates will not question my work. My wife will not question my love. And my children will never fear that their father will not come home.

I choose gentleness. Nothing is won by force. If I raise my voice, may it be only in praise. If I clench my fist, may it be only in prayer. If I make a demand, may it be only of myself.

I choose self-control. I am a spiritual being. After this body is dead, my spirit will soar. I will be drunk only by joy. I will be impassioned only by my faith. I will be influenced only by God. I will be taught only by Christ.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. To these I commit my day. If I succeed, I will give thanks. If I fail, I will seek his grace. And then, when this day is done, I will place my head on my pillow and rest.

May those that have ears to hear, receive these words of wisdom from the Scriptures and from our fellow pilgrims.

Amen.