

Temptations are Real
Luke 4: 1-13
March 6, 2022
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Baptized, anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus returns from the River Jordan and is then led by the very same spirit into the wilderness. The wilderness, a place in that day and age that would not be seen as a fine place for a get away, a little me-time and self-care, but rather, as Biblical Theologian Justo Gonzalez says, “The wilderness was a place of beasts and of fear, inhabited by powers of evil, that was best to be avoided,” (*Luke: A Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p 57.) The Spirit, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus, to the wilderness where for 40 days he fasted, and afterwards faced what that place and space was known to contain: the Devil, meets him, greets him and tempts him.

At first the temptations may seem extravagant and extraordinary. Possibilities of going astray that have little to nothing to do with normal people like us: turning stones to bread, ruling all the cities of the world, or demanding that God use divine beings to catch us as we dive off of a building. At first glance they are all a bit out there: seemingly well above our pay grades.

But let’s slow down our reading just a bit.
What might we learn from these words?
What in the narrative do we need to know?
How might this passage, change how you or I act in our daily lives?

If we take a moment to dig down and get past the special effects, the temptations that Satan places on a platter before a famished Jesus, represent categories, or areas that may well have a very real pull for all of us. In this time in our lives when naked, unfettered evil is prowling blatantly in our world, in this ending of winter, waiting for Spring, in this season known in the Christian world as Lent, in a time of traditional self-examination and repentance it might be a helpful exercise, to delve deep into these temptations, to look in the mirror and see where we might be pulled and drawn, were we not able to maintain our best selves. Simply put, how might you or I face these fiendish provocations?

“Command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” You are hungry, children are hungry, parts of the world are hungry—do this one quick thing and make a difference. Is this less about a magic trick and more about giving into settling for a quick-fix, to a complex problem. Change this situation for one person, one group—always helpful for those who have gained our attention. But does the quick, simple answer fool us into feeling as if the problem is solved. The problem is solved and solved by us. YAY. Yet, in many situations a quick answer is a short-lived solution. Far harder is for us to plant our feet, and not accept easy answers that offer short term glory. I am hungry, you are hungry, an entire class of people in our country work full-time yet do not earn enough money to feed their families. Food pantries and community kitchens are amazing and helpful ministries, yet the deeper fix is

to have the patience and tenacity to organize and mobilize to create enough dis-ease so that our minimum wage will finally enable all people who work full-time to feed our families.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to turn this stone into bread, the mistake is failing to look longer and deeper so that we might understand how much more needs to be done.

"I will give you this whole domain and glory of all these kingdoms...if you worship me it will be yours." Power is morally neutral. But what we do to achieve it and who we submit to or what we worship to gain power is not morally neutral. Very few of us will rule over kingdoms, but every one of us have and will have the opportunity to choose our personal goals and interests over the good of the community or the welfare of our neighbors. Any one of us can choose to worship possession of our own material goods and knowingly or unwittingly cause others to have less, or be at risk, because we want our needs to take precedence over others. We see this in Russia's naked grab for land and resources, over Ukraine's right to sovereignty and self-determination. Does the US' carbon foot print deserve to be so much greater than other countries with similar populations? We see this sin enacted the global stage and it is present in our own daily comings and goings.

When we choose our wants over the needs of our loved ones, friends, neighbors, colleagues, decide to do only what we want at the expense of the feelings or needs of another, or even in the grocery store when we willfully pull into the last parking spot, that we know full well should have gone to the person coming in from the other direction. Great or small, world-class or petty, we know about this temptation, to desire control or glory or to preference our needs at the expense of others.

"Throw yourself down...and God will protect you." How often do we put God to the test? Saying and thinking to ourselves, if you do this act for me, if you change this situation Holy One, or alter the course of this event, then I will believe. I will believe and never doubt. Then I will know deep in my heart that I am made in your image and likeness and matter. How often do we find ourselves longing for, striving for external validations of our worth? *"Enough talk about me. Now, what do you think about me?"*

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During this incredibly unsettled time in this world, on this First Sunday of Lent, I invite you to join me on a deep, prolonged, and no doubt unsettling contemplation of the temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness of the desert. As we engage in this disciplined meditation I also invite you to remember, as I will remind myself that we have the very resources that Jesus used to fight back and fend off the devil: "the word of God and the Spirit of God," (*The Gospel of Luke: New Cambridge Bible Commentary* by Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington, III p 105).

Made in God's image and likeness, baptized in the one, holy and undivided trinity, God has promised to be with us always, God's spirit is ever present with us. And God's word, as Paul says, in his letter to the Roman's, "God's word is near, and is on our lips." (Romans 10:8b). The Spirit of God and the Word of God, is with us, in this time of test and temptation. The

Spirit of God and the Word of God is with us, may we have the courage to dwell deeply in God's Holy presence.

Amen.