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TAMING OUR TEMPTATIONS

LUKE 4:1-13

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Jesus overcame the temptations in the wilderness, and He made it possible for us to overcome our temptations. Be like Jesus and just say no.

Does that sound familiar? I wouldn't be at all surprised if that's how we often hear today's Scripture (Luke 4:1-13). I'm guessing that most of us know the "Just say, No" story or some variation of it. Maybe it's what you were taught or have come to believe. I think for many it's a theme underlying Lent and a common approach for dealing with temptation in our lives. *Just say no and if you can't then try harder.*

Let me ask you, is it really that simple? Is that all there is to this story?

By now you may know me well enough to know that if I am asking those questions I don't think it is that simple. And you're right, I don't. It certainly hasn't been that simple in my life, I don't think it was in Jesus' life, and I suspect it's not in yours. Our lives and faith are more than the sum of our choices, and our temptations are rarely a simple choice between two things. So, I going to think out loud and ask you to consider a different way of seeing temptation.



- What if temptation is more than a yes or no question to be answered?
- What if temptation is not a pop quiz from God testing our love and devotion?
- What if temptations are more about our learning than God's score keeping?
- What if our response to temptation is more about a diagnosis than a judgment?
- What if temptation is necessary for our wholeness and restoration? Our salvation?
- What if instead of only asking what we will do with our temptations we also asked what we are willing to let our temptations do with us?
Have you ever thought about temptation in these ways?

I know this is not a typical perspective, but it might offer a different way of connecting life and faith. These questions tell a different story about temptation than the *just say no story* but they neither change nor do they distort the story of Jesus in the wilderness. Temptation is the story of Jesus in the wilderness, and that becomes more clear when we see what comes before and after today's Scripture.

The baptism of Jesus is the story immediately before today's gospel. Jesus' ministry in Galilee and His teaching in the Nazareth synagogue is the story immediately following today's passage. I want us to see and consider temptation, both Jesus' and our own, in light of that pattern: baptism, wilderness, public life and ministry.

Jesus went to the wilderness immediately after having been baptized (Luke 3:21-22). Remember what happened at His baptism? The heaven opened, the Spirit descended, and the Father declared, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The

Father claimed and identified Jesus as His own, just as He does at each of our baptisms.

After His baptism Jesus entered the wilderness with the Father's words echoing in His ears. His identity and relationship with the Father were a given before He went, even before He faced or responded to the first temptation. Whether Jesus said yes or no did not determine His sonship, His belovedness, or that God was well pleased. They already were the reality. Jesus could neither earn them nor lose them, and neither can we.

The temptations and struggles in the desert, did not determine how God would see Jesus but how Jesus would see Himself. "If you are the Son of God," began the devil's temptation of Jesus. It was less of a yes or no question about making bread and more of a question of Jesus knowing Himself and knowing for Himself.

The truth of Jesus' baptism and His Father's words were confirmed through Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. As Jesus emerged from the wilderness, this truth no longer echoed in His ears but in his heart, in the depths of His very being.

The temptations called forth in Jesus the confirmation of His baptismal identity and it was that identity by which Jesus overcame the temptations. The devil failed but "he done good." The devil had unwittingly tempted Jesus into knowing and experiencing the truth about Himself—His sonship, His belovedness, and His Father's pleasure. Jesus' identity and relationship with the Father were no longer only words spoken from heaven, but a truth and reality experienced in the wilderness, a truth and a reality Jesus would speak to the people of Nazareth.

After His time in the wilderness Jesus went to the synagogue in His hometown, Nazareth, and read to the people from the prophet Isaiah beginning with the words "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" and finishing by telling them,

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:14-21). We need no more clear picture of Jesus’ self-understanding. It was formed by the temptations and His wilderness experience. He is telling the people of Nazareth who He is and what He is about. This is Jesus’ identity and mission, the direction and work of His life. Temptations teach us that about ourselves.

Stay with me in this—our temptations, struggles, and wilderness experiences offer an opportunity to become more whole, more integrated, more fully ourselves. That’s what they did for Jesus and it’s what they can do for us. The desert monks certainly saw it this way. St. Antony the Great, sometimes called the father of monasticism, goes as far as saying, “Without temptation no one can be saved.”

We tend to focus on the person, thing, or situation that is tempting us, but might it really be about us? Our temptations say more about what is going on within us than what is happening around us. That’s why *just say no* is an overly simplistic understanding of this passage and an inadequate response to temptation. Temptation is less about our choice and more about our identity and direction in life.

Who am I? Where is my life headed? We answer these questions every time we face and respond to our temptations. We face ourselves and learn the ways in which our lives have become disfigured and distorted, disconnected from the original beauty of our calling and transforming presence of God. The type of temptations we experience and the circumstances by which they come have the capacity to reveal what’s inside us, what fills us. This means that whatever fills us, whatever is going on inside us, is triggered by the external circumstance of temptation.

Jesus, Luke says, “was full of the Holy Spirit.” That’s for us to know as we read and hear the temptation story, but I believe it was for Jesus to discover as He lived through these temptations in the wilderness. Temptation

offers us something to be discovered and the opportunity to recover ourselves. So let me ask you this, and I mean it in the best sense, what are you full of? What fills your life?

Perhaps look at what tempts you. What causes you to stumble? To fall? What distracts you? Who are the people that push your buttons? Where do you get caught? Trapped? What circumstances call forth a response other than the one you’d like it to be? It’s not easy to know your answers to these kinds of questions but it is important. It takes being present, some might call it mindfulness. It takes reflection without self-condemnation. I’m learning more about this right now in personal growth work that I’m doing. I’m learning that it’s not about the people, situations, or things. It’s far more likely to be about me and discovering what fills and directs my life. It requires asking, What’s going on in you? What do you see?

And regardless of what we see there within us, it’s just information. It’s not a final judgment, a conclusion, or your grade on God’s final exam. We don’t pass or fail our temptations. We learn the truth about how we see ourselves. We learn the truth about the direction our life is headed and who we are becoming. This learning is neither easy nor pain free, but it is the necessary learning by which God reshapes and redirects our life.

So here’s my thought ... what if this Lent we follow our temptations? I don’t mean we just say yes and give in to them. And I don’t mean we *just say no* and turn away from them. What if we follow the learning they offer us? Where would they take us? What would they give us? They would give us back ourselves. They would return us to the truth of who we are, daughters and sons of God, beloved children, with whom He is well pleased. That’s the gift of temptation and the good it unwittingly does.