

Sunday, March 6, 2022 – “Tempted by Religion”

– Bible Study & Reflection on Luke 4:1-13

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Luke 4:1-13 (*International Children’s Bible*).

¹ Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River. The Spirit led Jesus into the desert ² where the devil tempted Jesus for 40 days. Jesus ate nothing during that time. When those days were ended, he was very hungry.

³ The devil said to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, tell this rock to become bread.”

⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written in the Scriptures: ‘A person does not live only by eating bread.’”

⁵ Then the devil took Jesus and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. ⁶ The devil said to Jesus, “I will give you all these kingdoms and all their power and glory. It has all been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I wish. ⁷ If you worship me, all will be yours.”

⁸ Jesus answered, “It is written in the Scriptures: ‘You must worship the Lord your God. Serve only God!’”

⁹ Then the devil led Jesus to Jerusalem and put him on a high place of the Temple. He said to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, jump off! ¹⁰ It is written in the Scriptures:

‘God has put God’s angels in charge of you.

They will watch over you.’ [Psalm 91:11](#)

¹¹ ‘They will catch you with their hands.

And you will not hit your foot on a rock.’” [Psalm 91:12](#)

¹² Jesus answered, “But it also says in the Scriptures: ‘Do not test the Lord your God.’”

¹³ After the devil had tempted Jesus in every way, he went away to wait until a better time.

This Sunday is the First Sunday in Lent, and once again we encounter the temptation of Christ. For this very familiar story to speak anew to us, it may be helpful to consider how it functions in Luke’s Gospel and to attend to Luke’s particular treatment of the temptation in the wilderness. All three of the Synoptic Gospels put the temptation narrative shortly after Jesus’ baptism. Only Luke follows the temptation with Jesus’ disruptive, near deadly sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30).

For Luke, the temptation of Jesus is not just any sort of tempting moment, but a series of temptations. The temptations are a direct challenge to Jesus’ unique vocation as God’s Spirit-anointed Son. Jesus’ particular vocation is linked directly with his baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:21-22). That same Holy Spirit anoints Jesus to preach good news for the poor at Jesus’ hometown sermon (Luke 4:18-21). At stake in Luke’s temptation account is the fundamental question of just how Jesus will fulfill his Spirit-anointed vocation as God’s Son.

The Holy Spirit is said by Luke to be the main compelling force behind Jesus’ being in the wilderness in the first place. Jesus in Luke 4:1 is led by the Holy Spirit into the desert (read “wilderness”). We recall the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism. Somehow the temptation is being connected with the Spirit that alighted bodily like a dove on Jesus in Luke 3:21-22 and the Spirit that causes Jesus to preach at the synagogue from the scroll of Isaiah quoted in Luke 4:14. Somehow Jesus’ intimate connection with the Holy Spirit now drives him into the wilderness.

The desert (wilderness) is the region of both Divine meeting and demonic danger for forty days of testing. Jesus is hungry as he has eaten nothing all this time. His hunger makes him vulnerable. And who takes advantage of human vulnerability? The devil. Think of how Israel was tempted many times, often due to hunger, in its forty-year trek through the wilderness. So, Jesus is tempted in the desert/wilderness. Jesus' temptations are due to his being identified, in his baptism, as God's Son.

Luke 4:3 begins the three temptations. "You're hungry? Why not turn these rocks into bread?" It's important to note that Satan ("The Tester") says, "If you [really] are the Son of God . . . (ICB). That's what the angel designated Jesus as far back Luke 1:35. The debate is not over **whether** Jesus is God's Son, but **how** he will carry out his Spirit-anointed, Spirit-named mission. How will Jesus respond to his own immediate needs while interpreting the scriptures in relation to politics and power? That's a good question to ask ourselves.

Jesus responds with scripture, a quote from Deuteronomy 8:3. He refuses to turn away from his God-given mission. Satan slinks away. Strike one!

The second temptation follows in Luke 4:5-8 with the devil showing Jesus all the kingdoms (read "governments/empires") of the world, offering to give Jesus power and glory over them if Jesus will only bow down and worship the devil. Why are the kingdoms of this world given to the devil to give as Satan will? It's an intriguing question for which we have no ready answer. God has, for reasons known only to God, made the world's kingdoms Satan's, to do with as the devil pleases. Or maybe the devil is lying in his claim to have such corrupt power over politics. But then, look at what's happening in Ukraine.

Whatever the basis for Satan's claim, Jesus refuses again with a quotation from scripture, this time, Deuteronomy 6:4. Strike two!

Now comes the third and final temptation in Luke 4:9-12. The devil begins by quoting scripture. I guess the devil knows the scriptures as well as any Bible-thumping literalists and fundamentalists! Satan quotes Psalm 91:11-12 as a way of daring Jesus to jump off the "tip" of the Temple in Jerusalem, where the devil has brought them both. Since you are supposed to be God's Son, now prove it: "Go ahead! Jump off the top of the Temple and thereby prove to me and all Jerusalem that you are who the Voice at your baptism said you were! Don't the Psalms say that God takes care of God's chosen ones? And you certainly are God's Chosen One, aren't you?"

Jesus, however, will be a quite different version of God's Chosen One, God's Messiah, than was expected. Jesus comes not as a conquering dictator who will route the Romans, but as a suffering Servant fulfilling God's will. Jesus will not traffic in worldly power, whether it be the power of the Temple (religion) or the power so evident in Jerusalem (read Pontius Pilate and King Herod), or for that matter the Washington D.C. politicians who strive to gain power by using religion and trying to equate God and national interests as one and the same. Jesus not only turns away this final temptation with another scripture, Deuteronomy 6:16, but also refuses to tempt God by demanding Divine intervention. Satan strikes but will be up to bat again when he enters Judas and at Jesus' crucifixion. Later in Luke's Gospel, when we finally arrive at Luke 23:35-39, we will see Jesus again refuse or at least acquiesce not to Divine rescue.

The temptations are all challenges to Jesus' Spirit-appointed vocation as God's Son, which was revealed after his baptism (Luke 3:21-22) and described in his inaugural sermon at Nazareth in Luke 4:14-30. We hear no more taunting like, "If you really are the Son of God . . ." until Jesus' crucifixion in Luke 23 when the devil's words will be put on the lips of the crowd at the crucifixion and one of the criminals crucified beside Jesus: "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, God's chosen one! . . . Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:35b, 39b, *NRSV*).

Isn't that the great temptation that all of us face. "God save me from . . . God help me with . . ." You fill in the blanks. It seems that the devil is always ready to step up to the plate and take a swing.

I remind you how this story of Jesus' temptation ends, at the end of our forty-day Lenten journey. It ends, not with the fulfillment of Jesus' every desire, not with spectacular success. It ends on a cross, with Jesus doing what Jesus did in the wilderness – commending himself and his life into God's hands. That's what we do every time we worship God and through our daily actions . We come to church to learn how we can better obey God and follow the Way of Jesus – sometimes not a very easy way to follow.

Blessings on the Journey With Jesus,

Pastor Greg Rupright