Temptation in the Desert

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James


Sermon Series:
Life is Messy

Is Jesus divine or is he human?

The most watched movie of all time isn’t *Gone with the Wind* or *Star Wars*. This distinction belongs to a little known Christian evangelistic film called *Jesus*. It has been watched by a staggering number of people—5.6 billion worldwide. It has been translated into nearly 1200 languages, at last count. The film was produced by the Jesus Film Project, a division of Campus Crusade for Christ International. It was filmed away from Hollywood, with a no-name cast on a shoestring budget with virtually no special effects.

Hollywood has produced more than 100 feature films on Jesus since the first one debuted in 1903. Most of these movies you’ve never heard of, since they tend to get overlooked for Oscar nominations. In the early history of film, Jesus’ divinity took center stage. Jesus was portrayed as holy and altogether otherworldly. Witness his appearance in the 1927 blockbuster, *King of Kings*, where Jesus is represented with a permanent halo. Hollywood was reticent in those early years to display much about Jesus’ humanity to preserve his elevated status. This explains why he is viewed most often from behind or at a distance. Jesus isn’t given a speaking role until the 1961 remake of *King of Kings*.

In the mid-60s, Hollywood began to pay more attention to Jesus’ humanity. Two musicals from this era, *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, epitomize this shift. Jesus is portrayed as youthful, countercultural and hippie-like. In the last few decades, film producers have begun to push the envelope by trying to make something of Jesus’ relationship to Mary Magdalene. They take considerable liberties at teasing out his inner thoughts, particularly doubts about his mission or confusion over his identity.

We’ll devote four months worth of sermons to explore Jesus’ life and teaching as well as his death and improbable resurrection. Which Hollywood version is correct? Is Jesus divine or is he human? We will utilize an original source for this exploration, the gospel according to Luke, one of the four gospels in the New Testament. Gospel is an old-fashioned English word meaning good story. What Luke writes is essentially a good story about Jesus.
Luke is a physician by trade (Colossians 4:14). This explains the abundance of medical terms Luke utilizes to tell this story. Luke is also highly educated. His grasp of the Greek language is substantial and his choice of words rather sophisticated. He is a prolific writer, contributing more verses to the New Testament than any other writer, including Paul. Not only does he pen the gospel that bears his name but also writes a history of the early church in Acts. These two books function as a two-volume set about Jesus and his followers. Luke also serves as a traveling companion to St. Paul. Acts is replete with references to Paul and Luke journeying together throughout the Roman Empire, telling people the good story about Jesus (Acts 16:10-11).

As he emerges from the water, a voice from heaven declares, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (4:22). Jesus immediately withdraws to the desert to contemplate his mission. After 40 days, the devil appears to try and divert Jesus from his mission with three tantalizing proposals.

First, the devil attacks Jesus at the point of his physical need: “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread” (4:3). This is a delicious offer, given how famished Jesus is after 40 days of fasting. Jesus, however, recognizes the devil’s ploy and counters with words from Deuteronomy: “Man does not live by bread alone” (4:4). This verse from Deuteronomy reads in its entirety: “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Deuteronomy 8:3).

Next, the devil escorts Jesus to a high place and invites him to survey all the kingdoms of the world: “If you worship me, all the kingdoms of the world will be yours” (4:6-7). What a tempting offer. In this God-forsaken wilderness, where Jesus has nothing, the offer of everything must have seemed irresistible.

Jesus already has a premonition that his earthly ministry will entail suffering and sacrifice. There will be no gain without some pain along the way. Again he talks back to the
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The devil doesn’t give up without a fight. He tempts Jesus a third time by transporting him to the pinnacle of the temple and whispering into his ear: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guide you in all his ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone’” (4:9-11).

The devil can quote Scripture also. His reference to Psalm 91 serves to sweeten the deal. Jesus again puts Satan in his place with another reference to Deuteronomy (6:16): “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (4:12).

At this point in the story, their dialogue ceases. Our story ends with the chilling words, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until a more opportune time” (Luke 4:13).

There are, to my way of thinking, three lessons from this passage. One has to do with power, a second concerns this matter of temptation and a third centers on the very identity of Jesus.

First, this story teaches us about the nature of power. In all three temptations, Jesus is tempted to use his God-given powers for self-serving ends. He is enticed to use his power to satisfy his physical appetites, appease his quest for earthly rule and win people’s applause.

Power offers a cheap substitute for the hard task of love. It’s easier to want to be God than to love God. It’s simpler to want to control people than to love people.

Power is particularly tempting in a city like Washington. One of the best descriptions of this city is what a veteran Senator said to a newly-elected Senator, whom he was entertaining at his home overlooking the Potomac. As they sat watching the river, this senior Senator said to his junior colleague, “You see that log floating down the river? This city is like that log. There are hundreds of ants on that log and I suppose every one of them thinks he’s steering it.”

Second, this story teaches us about the nature of temptation. Evil can be enormously seductive. We would never be attracted to temptation if we recognized evil for how monstrously wicked it really is. Temptation often masquerades as something pleasurable, which explains our attraction to it. Thomas Jefferson once said, “Do not bite at the bait of pleasure, until you know there is no hook beneath it.”

Everyone is tempted; Jesus included. The real danger of temptation is allowing it to pull up a chair and keep us company. In Martin Luther’s words, “Don’t sit near the fire if your head is made of butter.” Or, if you prefer this Danish
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proverb, “No one can be caught in a place he does not visit.” OR, better yet, the writer of James writes, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (4:17).

When it comes to temptation, I commend to you the Joseph principle. When Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, he resurfaces later in Genesis as a chief steward in Potiphar’s house, a high-ranking official in Pharaoh’s Egyptian army. In his role as a household servant, Joseph comes into regular contact with Potiphar’s wife, who repeatedly tries to seduce him. One day, she grabs hold of Joseph’s tunic and won’t let go. Joseph’s only recourse is to run for it. When you are tempted, make like Joseph and run for it. Run as fast as your little legs will carry you.

Third, this story teaches us about Jesus’ identity. Earlier, I referenced Hollywood’s tendency to feature either Jesus’ divinity or his humanity. Scripture holds these two natures of Jesus together in creative tension. The Bible declares Jesus to be fully divine while affirming his essential humanity. I have featured Michelangelo’s famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel to remind us that Jesus is often portrayed in Scripture as the second Adam. He isn’t created by God; rather he is begotten. Jesus lives a fully authentic human life. Yet, there’s a colossal difference between Jesus and the rest of us. Jesus is without sin (Hebrews 4:15). As such, he is both fully human and fully divine.

This is why Jesus is ideally situated be our Mediator. He’s the perfect go-between. He’s superbly positioned between God and humanity to restore the relationship. Anthony Bloom, a Russian Orthodox monk, says it well: “The one who could place himself between the two would be someone who was equal to each of the two, who would put his hand on the shoulder of the living God without sacrilege, and on the shoulder of the man in his agony, without destroying him.”

This is why we talk about Jesus so much. No one else is able to stand in the breach and bring about redemption. Have you opened your life to this Jesus? Are there areas of your life you have sealed off from him? Jesus offers this astonishing invitation to a church in Revelation: “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I’ll come in and eat with you and you with me” (3:20).