

## “That Experience in the Wilderness”

Matthew 4: 1-11

Temptations. Today’s Scripture lesson is the story of Jesus’ temptations from the devil. My Bible notes say that these “illustrate Jesus’ habitual refusal to allow his sense of mission to be influenced by concern for his safety or for merely practical interests.” (Oxford Annotated Revised Standard Version of the Bible)

However, there are some other, different ways to look at this, as well. One would be that Jesus was undergoing training, as preparation for his ministry, trying to see if he would “break.”

Another one is the way The Message version of the Bible puts the whole thing; it is entitled “the Test.”

“Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it. Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test: “Since you are God’s Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread.”

Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: “It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God’s mouth.”

For the second test the Devil took him to the Holy City. He sat him on top of the Temple and said, “Since you are God’s Son, jump.” The Devil goaded him by quoting Psalm 91: “He has placed you in the care of angels. They will catch you so that you won’t so much as stub your toe on a stone.”

Jesus countered with another citation from Deuteronomy: “Don’t you dare test the Lord your God.”

For the third test, the Devil took him to the peak of a huge mountain. He gestured expansively, pointing out all the earth’s kingdoms, how glorious they all were. Then he said, “They’re all yours—lock, stock, and barrel. Just go down on your knees and worship me, and they’re yours.”

Jesus’ refusal was curt: “Beat it. Satan!” He backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God, and only serve him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.”

The Test was over. The Devil left. And in his place, angels! Angels came and took care of Jesus' needs."

Well, Jesus passed that Test, with flying colors! Using this idea, we could say that Jesus was now qualified to begin his ministry on earth.

He had resisted the temptation to feed himself by using miraculous powers. He was very hungry at that point, too. Forty days and nights of fasting will do that to a person. Yes, Jesus was a human man, experiencing hunger.

However, holy miracles are not meant to be conveniences. Going by the miracles which Jesus did perform, they are meant to help other people with real needs, and to demonstrate to other people that Jesus, being God's Son, truly had divine powers.

Temptation #2 was to jump off the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, which "most likely overlooked the temple courts and the deep valley of the Kidron below."

Again, Jesus said no. That kind of miracle would not have been of use to anyone else, either. It just would have been showing off, and making a mockery of the Temple, a place meant for the worship of God, not skydiving tricks.

Lastly, the devil made the offer of all the countries of the world IF Jesus would bow down and worship the devil. I have always wondered about that one, because it doesn't seem that the countries of the world belonged to the devil, or were his to give. Still, there are always folks who want to trade and give things which are not theirs. Of course Jesus resisted that one! Jesus was God's own Son; he knew better than anyone, that God, and God alone, was to be worshiped.

Now, one thing about the first temptation was that it was possible. Jesus could have turned the stones into bread and eaten them. That would not be the least bit tempting to us, because we have no such powers.

But, we do experience human hunger and physical needs, which can create a weak, low point in our souls. Think about that made-up word, "hangry" defined as "bed-tempered or irritable as a result of hunger." We get that way, or at least I do. And we generally do not fast from food for forty days and forty nights.

Jesus got hungry, and resisted that kind of temptation, and in doing so, set us a wonderful example.

The second temptation was less to do with Jesus' own abilities, and more to do with God's protection of him. The devil even challenged Jesus' position (at least in most versions of the Bible) with the word "if": If you are the son of God, throw yourself off, the angels will catch you. Did you notice that the devil even quoted Scripture, Psalm 91, to be exact? That is kind of creepy, having the devil use the words of God.

Yet, it happens. The words of God can be used falsely and wrongly. We have to be sensible and faithful when we think of the words in the Bible. They are meant to be taken rightly, not wrongly. For instance, the story in the book of Genesis, with the big brother, Cain, killing his younger brother Abel, is not advice on good family life. It is a story of something that happened and an example of what NOT TO DO! We have to take the words of the Bible as they are meant, not all twisted, the way the devil was trying to do.

The last temptation, worshiping the devil, didn't seem to be much temptation at all to Jesus. Even though the prize was to be "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor."

Still it tells us something. Anything which we could possibly get by even cooperating a little with the devil, much less worshiping the devil, would be tainted and evil and would go very, very wrong.

Another thing to consider in this episode from Jesus' life is the devil. The devil is referred to as tempter and Satan. He is evil and "actively hostile to God." (Oxford)

In art, generally, the devil is drawn as a red man with a tail, and horns, and a goatee, carrying a pitchfork. But I have never seen anyone, aside from someone in costume, who looked like that, have you?

That does not mean that there is no evil, it just means that it is not as noticeable as a red person. It would probably be easier if it were a red person—we could easily identify it and avoid it.

But no. There are disguises and such. In movies and TV alone, the devil has been depicted. There is the cartoon thing of a little red guy on a person's shoulder, being argued with by the little angel on the other shoulder.

Often, the devil is portrayed by a person, not a cartoon. For instance, in that baseball movie, Ray Walston was the devil. "Bedazzled," it was Elizabeth Hurley, and she is so pretty! The devil was Al Pacino in "the Devil's Advocate." Jack Nicholson played the devil in "The Witches of Eastwick." Most recently, I think, there is the TV show "Lucifer," with Tom Ellis as the bad one. Kind of interesting disguises and representations, huh? And probably, as such, harder to resist than a red person, when temptation are offered.

Temptations to do what is wrong and sinful can show up all the time for us. Like Jesus' temptations, they might involve something that seems like a benefit, physically. Or they might be a way to show off and look big and important. Or they might be real and serious involvement with evil itself.

Even so, we can resist temptations. Jesus, our Lord and Savior did, and he set us the example. The Holy Spirit is always there, willing to help us, as well. Remember how the Holy Spirit is described: "God present with us for guidance, for comfort and for strength", and "the divine presence in our lives whereby we are kept in perpetual remembrance of the truth of Christ, and find strength and help in time of need." ("A Statement of Faith of the Korean Methodist Church" and "A Modern Affirmation", United Methodist Hymnal)

The more we focus on what we believe, and who we believe in, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the more able we are to brush off temptations, large and small.

If we should slip, and sometimes we do. . . If we should slip, and give in to temptation then we will need to confess and ask God for forgiveness. God will forgive us, and we will be given another chance, and probably more help from on high.

However, it is better to resist and stay strong in our faith, and our lives will be the better for it. Amen.

Preached by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, March 1, 2020.

