

## 254 When You Are Tempted

*(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "When You Are Tempted", originally shared on February 25, 2023. It was the 254<sup>th</sup> video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bpHKaL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)*

Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness and then was tempted by the devil. But the devil didn't send him there. The Holy Spirit did. Why? What happened? And what does it tell us about overcoming our own temptations? Today, we're going to find out.

We got some rain at our house this week. There is bad weather all over the country. In Southern California we're in a storm like we haven't seen for over 30 years. It could even snow near our home, which hasn't happened since the early 90's. There are some places in the mountains near us that could get 7 feet of snow!

We've already had a fairly wet winter, and all this is coming after years of drought!

We marked Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, last Wednesday. Somebody actually asked me what day Ash Wednesday was going to be one year. I think that they meant "date". I hope so, anyway.

However, I would like to point out that there was no rain on Ash Wednesday and there is none predicted for this coming Sunday. Just sayin'. 😊

The Christmas Cycle has finished. Now we're in the Easter Cycle (Lent to prepare, Holy Week and Easter Sunday for the event, and the Easter season after Easter Sunday to reflect and apply).

We will mark the first Sunday in Lent this coming Sunday. Jesus is being tempted in the wilderness to give up what hasn't even started yet, his public ministry, his death and his resurrection in our Gospel reading for the day. We begin with the temptation to give up the sacrifice.

And that happened after 1,000 years of waiting for the promised Messiah, the Anointed One, the deliverer. Now he is here, and he is being tempted to just give up before he even gets started!

The American humorist and satirist of all things Lutheran, Garrison Keillor, once said that, for Lutherans, every Sunday is in Lent. I hope that he meant that every Sunday points to the love and grace of God in full exhibition and accomplishment on the cross, and not to our storied reserve.

We will see in **Matthew 4:1-11**, that Jesus was led up into the wilderness to be tempted. The context is set in **verses 1-2**,

*<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.*

I just want to point out something that, I think, we sometimes forget.

Jesus wasn't on a retreat to prepare for his public ministry. He wasn't in the wilderness to learn what he was supposed to do. Jesus wasn't sent there by the devil.

Jesus was led up by **the Spirit** into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Why?

I think that it has something to do with us. I think that Jesus is there to demonstrate who he is, that there is not some cosmic struggle going on between good and evil. God is in control. Jesus knows where he is going and is ready to go. But it wasn't going to be easy.

I saw a meme a while ago that showed a woman wearing a headscarf reading a note. The caption said, "It sure wasn't easy being the mother of Jesus..." The note read, "Dear Mom, Gone into the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted by Satan. Don't worry! xo J."

I'm very sure that it was difficult being the mother of Jesus.

Forty is a significant number in the history of Salvation. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights while Noah and his family and the animals floated in the Ark, Moses was on the mountain with God for 40 days, the liberated nation of Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years before they could enter the promised land, the prophet Elijah fasted for 40 days in the wilderness, Saul, David, and Solomon ruled over Israel for 40 years, Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights before his Temptation, there are 40 days in Lent (excluding Sundays) and there were 40 days between Jesus' Resurrection and his Ascension,

The devil comes to Jesus in the wilderness in what would be Jesus' very physically weakened state and right off the bat hits him at his point of greatest vulnerability, in **verses 3-4**,

*<sup>3</sup>The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."<sup>4</sup>But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

The devil questions whether Jesus is who he is, sowing seeds of doubt, and challenging him to prove it at a time when Jesus might be most tempted to do so. read.

I once fasted for 3 days and by the second day, I was dreaming about food. Food would have been a huge temptation. Any physical need is a huge temptation.

We are sometimes tempted when we have messed up and the devil says, "What a hypocrite! You aren't a Christian. Why pretend? Give up!" That's not the Word of God, that's the word of the devil. That's the word of the forces that defy God. The Word of God says, "I died for you. I overcame temptation, sin, death, and the power of the devil, for you.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, quotes scripture, **Deuteronomy 8:3**,

*He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*

So, the devil tries to get Jesus to prove who he is by an act of spiritual courage, in **verses 5-7,**

*<sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" <sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

The devil's words sound plausible, and he answers Jesus' resistance by also quoting scripture. The devil knows the Bible, and he quotes from **Psalms 91:11-12,**

*11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.*

*12 On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*

But he is quoting scripture to serve his own purpose and not the purpose of God. Jesus responds by quoting **Deuteronomy 6:16,**

*Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.*

I think of this section when people say that they are not wearing masks, or getting vaccinated, or washing their hands or anything else because they trust in God to protect them.

It seems to me that they are putting God to the test.

I believe that God does act in our best interests, but in what form and by what means are not always clear to us. God is God and we're not. We cannot use God for our purposes. That is putting God to the test.

The temptations continue with **verses 8-10,**

*<sup>8</sup>Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup>and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"*

So now it seems to me like the devil is getting frustrated. He resorts to a flat-out lie, some plausible disinformation, offering Jesus something that isn't his to give, something that belongs to God, something that is Jesus' for the asking, "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor", and the devil shows his true desire, "if you will fall down and worship me."

Jesus responds, quoting **Deuteronomy 6:13,**

*13 The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.*

The devil has no power over us. God promises us that we will never be tempted beyond our ability to endure. All the devil has is lies.

The Gospel reading concludes with **verse 11**,

*<sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

I've read a fair amount online from intercepted messages home by Russian soldiers in Ukraine on digital media. Some conversations are with their mothers and wives and girlfriends. Many of those discuss how war has changed their behavior, particularly their values of right and wrong. What was unthinkable becomes commonplace. Fear, peer pressure, and the sinful human heart have carried them to everyday atrocities. And they bring us to everyday temptations as well.

So, what are we to do when we are tempted to do what we know is wrong? Well, the short answer is to not do that. But how do we resist temptation? And how do we know the difference between what is right and what is wrong.

Oscar Wilde once said, "I can resist anything but temptation." Very funny. But what do we learn about how to resist from today's text?

Well, yes, Jesus was fully God. But he was also fully a human being. He was tempted because the devil thought he could break Him. How did Jesus know right from wrong, and how did he act on it?

**First**, we learn that Jesus knew the scriptures. He knew them by heart. He knew the words and he knew the presence of God in reading them.

The same Spirit that had led him into the wilderness to be tempted had prepared him through scriptures.

**Second**, we learn right from wrong from the Law of God that is in our heart. It becomes who we are and that becomes what we do.

This is very different from what much of our culture teaches.

Is everything just right for one person but not for the other? Or are some things right for everybody.

Who decides what is right from wrong. Christians and Jews and Muslims all agree and believe that morality comes from God.

Morality, knowing right from wrong, has to come from outside us. Otherwise, morality is just what we decide it is.

We see what happens when people forget about God in the Old Testament.

When you see that there is no one to rule the people for God and the words (i.e. **Judges 17:6**), "In those days there was no king in Israel, all the people did what was right in their own eyes," appear, you know something very bad is about to happen. It happens again and again.

**Third**, that the devil seeks us at a point of weakness with something that seems desirable, even good.

The devil tempted Jesus with an easy way out of the cross, with things that anybody might want, like us.

I once talked with a man whose vocation was in sales. He was a good salesman. His job required some travel, but he was also able to spend time with his family, which he loved.

One day, someone from higher-up on the company offered him a promotion at a sizably higher salary, but in a position that would require a great deal more travel, so much that he would have very little time with his family.

The man declined, saying that he wanted to be there for his wife and children.

“But,” the executive said, “think of all the good you could do for your family with more money.”

That’s a temptation. That’s the way the devil works.

**Fourth**, we learn that we are not alone. We have a model and helper for doing what is right, whatever the cost, in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes in **Hebrews 4:14-16**,

*14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

**Fifth**, we learn that there is no easy fix, only the honor and challenge of right living, growing through life transformation in a living relationship with the one true living God.

Do you remember the rock/pop trio “Hanson” (Mmmmbop!) I saw a picture of Zac Hanson the other day, dressed as a Greek Orthodox deacon. No, it wasn’t a music video. It was an announcement congratulating him on his ordination on February 5<sup>th</sup> of this year and reporting that he is now known as Deacon Mercurios!

Resisting temptation is more than denying ourselves things. It takes us to a whole new life of devotion and purpose.

You may have seen on the news the other day a story about the clothing brand “Supreme” setting up a store in West Hollywood. There is some concern because the “Supreme” brand is based on an interesting business model.

The clothing it sells comes in limited batches from new lines that are released twice a year. The plan is to make the merchandise seem exclusive by creating an artificial sense of scarcity, and the merchandise keeps coming. So, when the store is open selling a few new pieces every Thursday, huge lines form and sometimes fights break out, both in the line and in the store,

because many people buy goods to sell online. One guy being interviewed said that he was going to spend about \$150 and would sell the goods online for \$500.

That's a huge mark-up, and some people do make money. But other people pay the inflated prices because they think that they are getting something exclusive, even if it's artificially produced. And would you wear something that others think is rare and exclusive?

That's the thing about temptation. It only offers us something that is not real, and often to something that brings us harm.

Martin Luther, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Church reformer, once said, "You cannot keep birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." We can't keep from having thoughts that are contrary to the will of God, but we can keep from acting on them or allowing them to change who we are.

Lent is a time for reflection on that, for turning away from those things in our lives that grieve God, and for living in the power of the Holy Spirit, which wells up from within us, and opens our hearts and minds to the presence and power of God in the Bible, in ourselves, and everywhere around us.

Let us grow in our sense of Christian morality during this Lenten season and seek to live more deeply in the transformational relationship empowering us to live as the people of God. Especially in the wilderness times in our lives.

This Lent let's make it a practice to spend time in self-examination and show our appreciation for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ on the cross through love for God and love for one another. And, though temptations to give up the narrow way and follow an easier path may come, let us be grateful that we are not alone. That we are never alone. That Jesus fights with us, and that Jesus, the light of the world, has overcome!