

## **“The Temptation: Lessons from the Wilderness”**

*Luke 4:1-13*

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Very soon now we will be entering once again the season of Lent, a forty-day period which is intended to remind us of the forty-day experience of our Lord in the wilderness. We call this the Temptation because scripture tells us that following his baptism by John in the River Jordan, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. There in the wilderness Jesus struggled with his calling, with the shape of his ministry, and in doing so he has provided us with some of the most instructive and helpful lessons found in the whole of the Gospels.

And why is that? In *Hebrews 2:18* we read that because Christ has been tempted, he is able to help us with our temptations. In *Hebrews 4:15* we read that he was in every respect tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Therefore, I would suggest to you that as we consider the temptations and the struggles of our Lord in the wilderness we might well gain a clearer prospective of our own trials and challenges and in so doing find guidance and strength.

So, let me invite you to open your Bibles or a pew Bible to *Luke 4* and follow along this morning as we examine this episode from our Lord’s ministry. First, though, let us try to place the temptation in its proper context. I would like to do this by reminding you of the old television series called “Mission Impossible.” It was one of my favorite series on television. If you do remember it you may recall that every episode was divided into three stages. In the first stage, the assignment stage, the leader, Peter Graves of the mission team received his mission, his assignment, from headquarters and this was usually on a small taped recording, in those pre-digital days. The leader would take the recorder into some inconspicuous place, such as a public restroom in a bus station, where he would turn on the recorder and listen to the assigned mission, after which the tape would self-destruct.

Next came the second stage which was the strategy session. Here the leader would sit down with various members of the mission team and they would discuss the methods and strategy that they would use to accomplish the task assigned them. They always came up with wonderful disguises and had access to the latest technology. And then, the third and final stage was the actual implementation of the mission where it was carried out according to the agreed upon strategy.

Now if you look at the life and ministry (that is to say the mission) of Jesus in any of the synoptic Gospels, including Luke, you will find these same three stages, though they are not so obvious to the casual reader. First, there is the early stage where Jesus comes to see exactly what his mission is, his assigned role from the Father who sent him. Actually, if you go back to the age of twelve you can see that even at that early age it was beginning to dawn on Jesus that he was related to God in a very special way and had a particular duty to perform. When he became

separated from his parents on a Passover trip to Jerusalem, they found him amazing the teachers in the Temple. On that occasion Jesus said to his parents when they finally located him, “How was it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

But the actual assignment and confirmation of Jesus’ mission as God’s Messiah, as the Suffering Servant of the Lord, as the beloved Son of God, comes to Jesus during his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan, which you will note is the event immediately preceding his forty-day wilderness episode. You see, it was there in the Jordan that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and Jesus heard a voice from heaven say, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” That was the last thing Jesus heard before being led into the wilderness. It is at this point, according to many Bible scholars, that Jesus’ identity was confirmed, and his divinely appointed role was given. The voice from heaven is quoting from both *Isaiah 42* and *Psalms 2*. The quote from Isaiah which would have been well-known to a Jewish audience acquainted with the Scriptures was a quote from the first of Isaiah’s four Servant Songs in which the coming Messiah is described as a suffering servant. The voice from heaven also uses words from a royal psalm, a psalm that would have been read when a new king was coronated in Israel and who was reminded that as king he was to be a servant of God, indeed the Son of God. So, if you put together these two quotations from the royal psalm and a suffering servant song of Isaiah the message to Jesus would have been that yes, he was God’s Son and yes, he was the Messiah and yes, he was King but unlike any other king he was being anointed to serve and suffer for his people. His kingdom would not be at all like the world’s kingdoms.

Now immediately we read that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for forty days and nights he struggles with what being God’s Suffering Servant Messiah is all about. If he was to be a king, what kind of king would he be and what kind of kingdom would he establish? The wilderness, therefore, is the second stage of Jesus’ ministry and mission. We can almost regard the wilderness struggles as our Lord’s internal strategy session within his own heart and mind where he considers the methods he will employ as a servant Messiah to bring in God’s kingdom.

The third and final stage begins at verse fourteen where we read that Jesus actually begins his Galilean ministry, where he begins to implement the mission that was given in the river and the strategy that was embraced in the wilderness. Are you with me so far?

So, what is the nature of the struggle the substance of the temptations going on in the wilderness and what are its lessons for us? We all know how difficult it can be to live up to the expectations of God and to the expectations of other people at the same time. But it was no different for Jesus. One set of expectations would have to take priority and Jesus must have known this as he journeyed into the desert. His major concern was what did God expect him to be and to do as the Messiah. What kind of kingdom would God have him establish? How would he bring it in? Jesus must have been aware of the fact that his contemporaries in first century Palestine had many conflicting views and expectations about the coming Messiah and the kingdom to be established. And in the wilderness Jesus had to determine how or if their expectations varied from his Father’s.

Some with Judaism, the Zealots, (Sicarii) believed that God's kingdom would come about through force, through military revolution that would throw out the Roman infidels and occupiers. Naturally they expected the Messiah to be a military leader.

The Pharisees, by contrast, claimed that the kingdom of God, the reign or rule of God, would come about through obedience to the hundreds of oral laws (613 to be exact) that grew out of the written Law, the Torah. Understandably, it is the Pharisees who become enraged when this Jewish rabbi named Jesus, whom some believed to be the Messiah, openly defied many of their rules and laws.

The Sadducees were yet another group that claimed that the kingdom of God would come about as a result of great loyalty to the festivals and sacrifices of the Temple. Then there were the Essenes, yet another group within Judaism who believed that the kingdom could only come about when the faithful within Israel withdrew from a cruel and ungodly society and became, as it were, spiritual hermits, holy and detached from a flawed and perverse world.

Now surely Jesus heard all of these voices in his head as he made his way through the wilderness, but he also heard the voice of God spoken through the Prophet Isaiah and the Psalmist reminding him that the suffering servant would be a king bringing in God's kingdom. God was calling Jesus to be a different kind of king and he was establishing a radically different kind of kingdom from what the world and even his own people expected.

Now before we get into a consideration of the temptations let me make two quick observations. First, it is not necessary to consider the three temptations as specific incidents that occurred during the forty days though they may well have been that. But it seems more helpful to me to regard these three temptations as indicative of the kinds of challenges and tests that Jesus faced throughout the forty days and indeed, throughout the course of his life (see v.13). Even as he hung upon the cross he was challenged to save himself if he was really the Messiah.

And the second observation is that these temptations are not necessarily to do or to be something bad or evil, but rather to be or do something other than what God expected of his Messiah. That is to say, temptation is not only to do bad things but to do the wrong things or even to do good things which may not necessarily be the best things or the right things at the right time.

Now for the first temptation, follow along with me through verse four. Some say that this temptation arose out of our Lord's personal hunger, that is to say, he was fasting and verse 2 reminds us that he was famished. If this is true, then Jesus is resisting here the temptation to use his great power to selfishly satisfy his own personal needs. And yet, I think it is more than personal hunger that gives rise to this temptation.

It could well have been our Lord's personal concern for all the hungry people in the world of his day. Only twenty percent of Palestine was capable of growing food and Jesus undoubtedly saw thousands of malnourished and starving people in the course of his ministry. Surely his heart went out to them. In addition, he knew that one of the hopes of Israel was that when the Messiah finally came there would be food available for everyone. Amos and other prophets mentioned this specific hope. In John's account of the feeding of the five-thousand the

people observing are recorded as saying, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world” (John 6:14) and they wanted to make him the king by force.

This congregation like many others tries to address the continuing plight of world hunger and malnutrition. It is part of our mission as well here at First Pres through Hot Dish & Hope and Meals of Hope. We share this mission and this concern with our Lord. When Jesus saw the rocks and boulders strewn all around him in the wilderness resembling large loaves of baked bread, he may well have thought to himself. “If I only use my power to transform these stones into loaves of bread, there would be food enough for everyone.” Obviously, this would have been a good and wonderful thing, to have food sufficient to feed the hungry. But, was this the primary good? Was this the major thing that God would have his suffering servant accomplish? Jesus must have decided that it was not.

You see, Jesus’ mission was to bring people into the kingdom of God, to bring them under the reign and rule of God, and it was not true then nor it is true now that well-fed people are necessarily more responsive to the will and work of God than hungry people. Well-fed people do not necessarily strive for justice, exercise compassion, work for peace, seek mercy, or practice humility. Well-fed people are sometimes even less submissive to the will and ways of God than hungry people who better realize their dependence upon God alone.

Now to be sure, all people need food and Jesus would devote a portion of his ministry to physically feeding the hungry, but a far greater need within the lives of individuals is to be in a right relationship with God and neighbor. Doing good things like feeding the hungry was important to Jesus but it was not allowed to supplant doing what was most important and what was best. Jesus’ first priority was providing spiritual food that would move people to submit to God as the king of their lives. And so Jesus who would later call himself the “Bread of Life” resists the Tempter’s first challenge by quoting from Deuteronomy, “One does not live by bread alone.”

Notice however, that Jesus does not say that one can live without bread but rather that something more than bread is needed, and this would be the primary focus of his mission. Likewise, those of us who follow Jesus must be committed to feeding the hungry yet that is not our primary mission or our major concern as the church today. And we dare not allow doing a good thing to obscure us from doing the best thing. Our primary mission as disciples of Jesus is to help bring the lives of people under the reign of God.

The second temptation we read of in verses five through eight The challenge facing Jesus here is whether or not he would compromise his methods in order to more quickly achieve his goals. Understand that the kingdoms of the world that the devil held before Jesus were kingdoms that the Messiah wanted to win over so that their citizens might worship and serve the living and true God. So our Lord had then and has now a vision of conquest. The second temptation for Jesus was whether or not he would use a devious or ungodly means in order to achieve a worthy end. Would he bow down to the devil in order to more quickly accomplish his goals? Of course, Jesus resisted. Again, he quotes from Deuteronomy, “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

A lesson we might learn from this second temptation is that if we have a sacred goal, then we should employ a sacred means to attain it. “The end justifies the means” is not a quote from Scripture nor is it compatible with the life and ministry of Jesus, God’s Messiah. What on earth is the good of conquering the world if one must sacrifice the integrity of one’s soul to accomplish it. Yet how often we are tempted to take short cuts to worthy goals. How often we are tempted to employ the tactics of the world in order to accomplish some noble or Godly purpose. The Christian businessman is often tempted to employ the same tactics as his unprincipled competitors. The Christian student who longs to serve God in her career and knows that she must get into graduate school, may be tempted to cheat as others do in order to attain the grades necessary. The Christian citizen may be tempted to think that in the political arena one must fight fire with fire. Therefore, if dictatorships are trying to undermine democratic societies it only follows that democratic institutions should seek to undermine governments they oppose. And if terrorists have no qualms about maiming innocent citizens why should we worry if innocent people have to die when we retaliate against them? But every time we adopt the ways of the world we sink to the level of the world, yet as God’s people we are called to be different.

The third temptation appears in verses nine through twelve. The temptation here is two-fold. It is first of all the temptation to become a wonder worker, a miracle worker, if you will. Of course, anyone who can perform wonderful and amazing feats quickly receives a wide following and becomes very popular. Yet Jesus knew that this was not what God would have him to be and to do as the Suffering Servant Messiah. Consistently throughout his ministry Jesus refuses to use his power to perform wonders that would impress the people. Whenever people ask for such a miracle for the miracle’s sake, Jesus refuses. Oh, he knew that miracles might amaze and attract people but he also knew that this would not necessarily lead them to submit to God as the King of their lives.

But don’t we often think, would it not have proved his Messiah-ship if Jesus had thrown himself off the Temple? But you see, Jesus was not in the business of proving his Messiah-ship or testing God’s power. He was in the business of getting people to change the direction of their living and the allegiance of their lives. Jesus knew then what we must come to know in our day and that is that the doing of marvelous and miraculous things might draw crowds and get one’s name in the lights, but like giving people full bellies that does not necessarily make them more loving, more just, more compassionate, more humble, more Godly. Jesus knew that the Lord longs for our allegiance, not our amazement; our commitment, not our compliments. Jesus was interested in followers, not fans.

A second way of seeing this third temptation is to regard it as the temptation to expect special favor and protection from God. Many people believed, as Jesus may have been tempted to believe, that being God’s Messiah would exempt him from hurt and harm. From the wilderness to the cross the devil was attempting to divert Jesus’ mind from Isaiah’s portrayal of a Suffering Servant Messiah. Peter and the other disciples had a hard time with this idea as well and refused to believe Jesus when he told them that he must suffer and die. So Jesus resisted the Tempter in the wilderness by telling him in the words of Deuteronomy once again, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

God Almighty shows no favoritism, not even to his Son. We might do differently if we were God, but we are not God, while God may give us the courage and the strength to endure pain he does not save us from it. An angry mob would soon verbally and physically abuse Jesus in the worst of ways and nail him to a crude cross. But Jesus was willing to make himself vulnerable, to expose himself to hurt and to harm in order to minister to God's sinful people as he bore the penalty for sin, and in order to demonstrate the depth of God's love for humankind.

In each of the three temptations in the wilderness there is an appeal to be popular and successful. Jesus knew this temptation in his day even as we do in ours. Jesus had the choice of being successful in God's eyes or being successful in the eyes of the world. But in the wilderness our Lord realized that he could not be both. And the truth is that by the world's standards Jesus was not very successful, at least at the moment of his death. He died as a common criminal, his friends having deserted him, his few followers having turned against him, and yet, because he was faithful to God's mission and successful in God's eyes he was raised in glorious power to rule the universe. Is it not true that God calls us to be faithful...not successful.

There in the wilderness Jesus could have decided to be a successful and popular Messiah. He could have fed the hungry, he could have been an economic deliverer; he could have been a military and political ruler of the world's kingdoms; he could have been a miracle worker and divine stuntman. Had he done any of these things he would have won the praise and accolades of the crowd but in doing so he would have risked losing the favor and approval of God.

Is there anyone here this morning who cannot identify with the temptation to be something other than what God would want us to be: We know temptations in wildernesses of our own. As business people, as family members, as politicians, as citizens and church members, as preachers and parishioners, we can strive to be and to do what others would have us to be and do or we can choose to obey the will of God as we are enabled to see it. Each of us will go through struggles like these and wildernesses of our own but there are lessons we can learn from our Lord's experience. Each of us will hear the voice of the Tempter whispering alternatives and diversions from God's perfect will. Each of us, like Jesus, must come to terms with the shape our lives and our service will take. God called his Messiah as he calls those who carry on the Messianic ministry, not to a life of popularity or worldly success, not to a primary ministry of economic, military, or political deliverance, not to a crowd-pleasing ministry of miracles and wonders, but rather to a life of vulnerable involvement in the pain of the world, a life of sacrificial love that will lead others to bow down and serve the living God and to acknowledge him as the King of the world and King of their personal lives. May God help us and accompany us into the various wildernesses of our journeys and may God give us the strength to be and to do what is God's good pleasure.

*Lord God, we confess that like our Lord, we often hear other voices telling us what we should be and how we should live. Help us, like your Son our Savior, to resist. Lead us into lives of involvement and sacrificial love and save us from the temptation to be popular or successful at the expense of our fidelity, the temptation to deal with people's symptoms rather than with their disease of estrangement from you and from their neighbors. This we ask in the Messiah's name as we enter this Lenten season and contemplate our own wilderness. Amen.*