

## The Tempter's Choice

TEXT: Luke 4:1-13

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on February 18, 2024*

So far, we've been talking about choices in pretty simplistic terms. Good choices vs. bad choices, as defined by how those choices turn out for ourselves and others. But choices are so hard to make because it isn't nearly that simple. Choices aren't made in a vacuum and the surrounding circumstances of our lives dictate the kinds of options we have and how much a given choice will matter.

The story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness is a story about choices. With the devil presenting the choices, we can assume that the choices will not be as straightforward as they might be when coming from someone else. John's Gospel calls the devil the "father of lies," and that's one of the most universally true statements in the whole Bible.

And because the devil is presenting the choices to Jesus, we can also assume that the choices Jesus makes will have significant impact for Jesus and, therefore, significant lessons for us.

The first thing to understand about the passage itself, of course, is the context. This story appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke; and in all three places it happens immediately after Jesus' baptism, which happens before his ministry begins. In all three gospels, Jesus' baptism is the very first time we see Jesus as an adult. In Mark, it's the first time we see him at all, since Mark has none of the birth or childhood narratives we know from the other gospels.

In all three baptism stories, the Spirit of God descends on Jesus; and in all three temptation stories, it's that same Holy Spirit that immediately leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And I do mean immediately. In Mark and Matthew, the note that the Spirit of God led Jesus to this experience is the very next sentence and here in Luke the only thing separating them is Matthew's genealogy of Jesus and a sentence detailing that Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work.

The most important thing to note is that Jesus does not begin ministry, or even assemble his team of disciples, until after this time of temptation, and that doesn't happen until after God's Spirit fills him during his baptism. So, this story is not Jesus running into the devil in the wilderness while on some other mission. The Spirit of God directly leads Jesus, straight from his baptism, into a harsh environment for this exact purpose.

The Greek word for "tempt" here comes from the word for "trial," but not in the legal sense. It's a test, but this test is not an entrance exam. This is not the SAT's. It's the test that comes when you have finished your preparation and believe you're ready to enter your chosen field. It's passing the Bar for lawyers or the Medical Boards for doctors or being approved by the Board of Ordained Ministry to become clergy in the UMC. It's the test that determines whether or not you are ready and equipped to be deployed for your life's work.

All of that means that the tests Jesus gets in this passage—tests that are the same in each version of the story—are critical for Jesus to pass if he's to fulfill his ministry going forward. The testing happens in the desert wilderness over a 40-day period, where the physical stamina and endurance of Jesus is stretched thin. That, too, is necessary. In the final days and hours of Jesus' life, he will have to make these same kinds of choices, even while being beaten, mocked, and killed as slowly and cruelly as the Romans knew how.

With this test, the clock begins ticking on what will only be a three-year ministry. Jesus doesn't have decades of opportunity for trial and error. Is he ready? Can he make the necessary choices, even in extremis? Even when the one doing the testing has all the tricks and tools of the devil himself? That's what's being tested here—not because God is being mean, but because this level of testing is necessary for the job Jesus was born to do.

So, let's look at the choices the devil offers, why they are critical to Jesus' ministry, and why they're important for those of us who claim to be Jesus' disciples or as we phrase it now, Christian.

The text tells us that this time of testing goes on for forty days and that Jesus didn't eat during that entire time. That's the perfect setup for the first test for two reasons.

First, it shows us the humanity of Jesus. Christian doctrine teaches that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. But during his time on earth, Jesus is living the fully human part of that equation. He doesn't miraculously escape hunger after not eating for 40 days just because he's Jesus. Too many of us think we can't possibly do what Jesus did because we're "only human." Jesus was fully human, he got hungry when he didn't eat and tired when he didn't sleep, just like the rest of us.

But, unlike the rest of us, Jesus took on that humanity by choice; and it's that choice that the devil tests right out of the gate. Okay, Jesus, feel that hunger. Are you sure you want to be fully human? You're the son of God after all. You could just do half. Just turn these stones into bread. Maybe others couldn't do that, but you could. No one would be the wiser out here in the desert. You're going to need your strength to help others as soon as you leave this place. Here's a stone. Make it bread and regain your strength.

That's the core first test. Jesus became fully human. In John's language, the Word became flesh. If Jesus' life and ministry are to have any value, he has to remain fully human. Others can't be expected to follow the example of a God. Those Jesus teaches will have to know that the life he leads is possible also for them; that the example he sets for them might be difficult, but it is achievable for every human being. If Jesus is to become the "new Adam" as Paul will come to call him; he must in every way be like the first Adam, except for the choice to eat the fruit before he's allowed.

In fact, you could see this first choice in the temptation story as a parallel to that one. God takes on human flesh in Jesus to experience life as a human being and to model the way the world could regain what it lost by the first Adam's choice.

Adam and Eve decided they wanted to be like God and ate the fruit. It wasn't a great choice. Now Jesus has the same test. Adam 2.0. Are you here to be God, Jesus? Or are you here to be a man, a mortal—fully human—someone living in solidarity with hungry people who can't just turn stones into bread. You're hungry, starving even. Pick your side.

Jesus answers with a quote from Deuteronomy 8:3, "One does not live by bread alone." Matthew includes a few more words from the quote, adding, "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." That sounds like Jesus is saying that spiritual food will give you nourishment, so Jesus—at present a starving man—doesn't need to worry about physical food. But if you follow the trail back to the source of the quote in Deuteronomy, that's not what the verse is saying.

The context back there is Moses reminding the Israelites of how God fed them manna when they were hungry during their forty years in the desert. When Moses tells them, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord," the word that came from the mouth of the Lord to the Israelites was the promise of actual food to keep them from dying of starvation, not a claim that they could sustain their physical bodies by meditating on God's commandments.

Moses is reminding them that they have already seen God provide for their physical needs and therefore they should trust that word, that promise of provision, to continue.

Jesus clearly aced his Hebrew school exams and tells the devil that God will provide for his physical hunger, just like God provided for his ancestors. He'll trust that word of God, just as the Israelites did and as every other starving mortal must. Test one: Will you stay fully human even when it means extreme hardship? Yes. Stones remain stones. Jesus remains hungry. Passed.

Next up, the devil pulls up Google maps and shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. The devil makes the claim that all those kingdoms belong to himself and he, the devil, will give Jesus complete power and authority over them if Jesus will bow down and worship him.

Why the devil believes he has authority over all the kingdoms of the world is a matter of scholarly debate that we don't have time for. There's not an obvious text that claims this.

What we do know is that Jesus is living in an occupied colony of the largest empire on earth at the time—the Roman Empire. The life in the colony of 1<sup>st</sup>-century Palestine that we see in the Gospels was rife with corruption, hardship, and cruelty. So, whether the devil's claim to authority is valid or not, the test for Jesus is easy to see. The Messiah's job, as described in the prophets, is to liberate the captive, to heal the sick, to help in every way possible—and what could possibly be more help than freeing people from the grip of empire.

Jesus didn't need to see all the kingdoms of the world. He only needed to see the one that was visible from the nearest hill—his own. His own people suffered. His own parents had to flee to Egypt when he was a toddler just to escape a mad king who butchered babies in Jesus' home town in the hopes of cutting Jesus' own life off before it had a chance to really begin.

As physically hungry as Jesus was, his hunger to free his people was a thousand times greater. He knew he could rule with love and compassion and generosity. He could make life instantly better for every kingdom on the earth if he took this offer. But the price would require a violation of the first of the Ten Commandments to have no other gods. Jesus can't go there.

It's interesting that Jesus doesn't quote directly from Exodus here. Instead, he goes back to Deuteronomy, this time to chapter 6, verse 13, which reads in full, "The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear." Do you know how Deuteronomy 6 begins? It begins with what Jesus identifies as the greatest of all the commandments of the Torah.

It's the only commandment that God tells the people to plaster absolutely everywhere—on the doorposts of their houses and gates, on their hands and foreheads, and to recite it first thing in the morning and last thing before bed every night: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

God told Moses to put the Ten Commandments in a box and sit on them. But this one from Deuteronomy? It goes absolutely everywhere. That's the text inside a Mezuzah attached to Jewish doorposts. It's the text inside the phylactery on the forehead or hands of Orthodox Jews. It is recited at every Sabbath service in a synagogue as the entire congregation stands together to recite it.

Jesus could have probably made this choice back when he was teaching in the temple at twelve years old. He was here to free those in bondage; but he would not use the methods of human kings and empires and direct his worship to whomever promised him power. He would not exchange the compassion of the one God for the deceptive whims of a false one.

In Matthew's gospel that test comes last. Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience so it makes sense that he would put the greatest test—who do you worship—paired with the greatest commandment at the end of the series. But Luke is writing for a particular Roman friend named Theophilus, a man believed to be of high social standing, and perhaps an actual Roman official. Theophilus would not have had the negative associations with the Roman empire that the Jews in Palestine had, and he would not have felt the importance of Deuteronomy 6 as strongly, if at all.

So, Luke picks a different test to go last in his presentation to Theophilus. The devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem and puts him at the highest point of the temple. And here, Satan quotes Scripture to Jesus, using the Psalm we used as our Call to Worship this morning, Psalm 91. In a sense, it's a response to Jesus' claim in the first test that God will take care of him and meet his needs. Probably why Matthew puts it right after that one.

Satan takes that claim up a notch and basically says, "Okay, Scripture bingo it is. I'll play. This Psalm right here claims that God will protect you from even stubbing your toe on a stone. So...show me. Jump off the temple and let the angels catch you. Let me see evidence of how God really has your back.

And where does Jesus go with that? Straight back to Deuteronomy 6, this time in verse 16: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." As a Roman official, Theophilus would have more easily seen that it would be stupid to test the protection of the emperor, and how doing so might cost him that exact protection. Just because the emperor swore to protect his citizens didn't mean that there wouldn't be trouble if one of his officials started a street fight just to see if the emperor would come running out of his palace to help.

Testing boundaries is what children do, starting with the day a child learns the word, “No,” and growing ever bolder with those tests right on through adolescence. That’s a crucially important part of growing up, but it’s supposed to be worked out by the time we reach adulthood and certainly by the time we are placed in a leadership position.

If Jesus were still testing boundaries; if he didn’t know and understand the boundaries of what God had sent him to do in this fully human life; and if he wasn’t able to toe that line, he would not be fit to lead. Theophilus totally would have understood that flunking that test would have sent Jesus back to the drawing board, even if he’d passed the other two. Jesus swats that test down like a fly. And with that behind him, the devil departs. Matthew tells us that angels came and ministered to Jesus when it was all over. But Luke does some foreshadowing instead, saying only that the devil departed from Jesus, “until an opportune time.”

We’ll visit that opportune time in about six weeks, when Jesus will sweat drops of blood in the garden as he has to choose to remain fully human yet again; when he will face the Roman authorities and, with his life on the line, choose again his allegiance to God over them; when he will face the boundary of a deadly cross, reinforced by nails, and choose again not to test the promise of God’s protection, even as he cried out words of feeling forsaken from Psalm 22.

When Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” was the devil right there whispering, “Told you so. If you’d let me show you at the temple three years ago, you could have saved yourself from all this. You’ve given it all for a fraud.”? Fortunately, the story doesn’t end there.

The tests Jesus had to pass are the tests awaiting every one of us who seriously considers taking the name of Christian. Will we recognize that stepping in to help a suffering world means that we will inevitably suffer ourselves? Will we turn our privileged stones into bread for ourselves, while others remain hungry? Will we worship the God of the desert or the God of golden thrones and powerful empires? Will we refuse to go forward to free the captive, heal the sick, and give sight to the blind unless and until God proves to us that nothing bad will happen to us if we try?

It’s not an easy exam, but Jesus chose to put aside being fully God for a time to show us that it was possible to pass it just with our full humanity. It’s Lent, not the time to point fingers outward but to ask questions of ourselves. We see from the life of Jesus how much *God* loved the world. How much do *we* love it? What are we willing to give to free it? To heal it? To save it? Amen.