

Lent 1C 2025 Luke 4:1-13

When I was growing up, we had Wednesday Lenten services at 6:30 in the morning, before work and school. Although I am a night owl, my mother and I managed to make almost all of those services when I was in high school. One of those years, after hearing today's readings, and having not yet picked a fast, I did the classic giving up chocolate for Lent. That took some self-discipline, considering a previous Lent I found where the Easter candy was hidden, and when my mother went to put my basket together, discovered that I had already eaten the ears off the chocolate rabbit. But this time I prevailed over temptation and made it all the way to Holy Week, very proud of my will power...until I suddenly remembered that on Ash Wednesday, the very first day of Lent, after that 6:30AM worship service, when we drove through McDonalds on the way to school, I had ordered a hot chocolate. My Lenten discipline of which I was so proud had lasted all of twelve minutes, and I hadn't even realized it. Any time I read today's gospel, and start to think I can overcome temptation because Jesus overcame temptation, I think of that time I made my best effort and failed in about the same amount of time it takes to cook spaghetti.

Every First Sunday of Lent we read the story of Jesus overcoming the devil's temptations in the wilderness, which is the first thing that the Holy Spirit leads Jesus to do following his baptism. Lest we think getting baptized prevents us from ever facing trials or temptations, this passage debunks that theory. The threefold test or riddle is a literary motif found across cultures, from at least as far back as the Epic of Gilgamesh, which predates Genesis by several hundred years, to at least as recently as the final installment of the Harry Potter series. Jesus' specific temptations are representative of our tendencies as human beings to break God's commands outright, to compromise or bend the rules, or to pretend the ends justify the means. Biblically, the devil is not the red guy with a horns and hooves but the tester who questions and challenges as if conducting a cross examination in a trial.

If you are the Son of God... is the kind of tactic that bullies use in the school yard to try to taunt their victims into doing something ill-advised to prove themselves. At Jesus' baptism, which took place just before this scene, the heavenly voice claimed Jesus as the Beloved and well-pleasing Son; so Jesus' identity is not in question. What we could say is at stake is the character of God as it will be revealed through the actions of God's Son. So, what is appropriate behavior for the Son of God, behavior that is consistent with the nature of God, behavior that should be emulated by subjects of the kingdom of God? See how Jesus responds to each test:

Command this stone to become a loaf of bread. Jesus hasn't eaten in 40 days and is, as Luke probably understates, famished. There is nothing wrong with food or satisfying hunger. In fact, later in the gospel Jesus will feed multitudes with bread through means that seem at least as miraculous as transforming one stone into a loaf. But, assuming Jesus has the power to transform

rocks into bread, Jesus chooses not to use that power, which would certainly transgress the boundary between human and divine abilities, for his own benefit. He doesn't let the devil talk him into "playing" God as a show of force or to satisfy himself. He is God, and he will exercise his divine power not selfishly but on behalf of other people. And so far as the acquisition of any material possessions goes, Jesus reminds us, *One does not live by bread alone*; that is, there is more to life than stuff, even good and necessary stuff. Jesus overcomes the human instinct to defy even nature for personal gain.

Then the devil tries, *Worship me, and the glory and authority of all the kingdoms of the world will be yours*. First, we might challenge the devil's claim that he possesses the glory and authority of all the nations. Just because he says it doesn't mean it's true. Glory and authority rightfully belong to God and therefore are the inheritance of the Son; so the devil can't give Jesus what already belongs to him. But Jesus also refuses the *method* by which the devil offers for power, answering *Worship the Lord your God and serve only him*. Humanity will worship and serve all kinds of ungodly people and ungodly things in pursuit of power; we'll even tell ourselves we're doing it in Jesus' name. But Jesus, who comes into his kingdom by way of the cross, does not need to make a deal with the devil or to rule by earthly power. We humans think we need power to win, but the Son of God changes the world by through mercy and compassion.

Then the final test: *Jump and let the angels catch you before you splatter*. Considering the cross that looms on the horizon, this is perhaps the most tempting of all the devil's offers, the temptation for Jesus to avoid all the pain, vulnerability, and consequences of the human condition. But defying gravity is not playing by the rules. One of the themes of transgression found all throughout scripture is the attempted violation of the boundaries God has put in place; it goes all the way back to the restriction on just that one tree whose fruits would not so much make us *like* God, since we were already made in the image of God, but tempted us to try to be the *same as* God. We are finite creatures living in a finite world; when we act carelessly, as if our abilities and our resources are infinite, our arrogance invites disastrous consequences. Jesus warns us, *Do not put the Lord your God to the test...or you'll find out the hard way*.

Whether we adopt a discipline of fasting this Lent or not, this story is not supposed to be a pep talk or even a challenge: *Jesus went 40 days without eating anything, so surely we can go 40 days without chocolate or coffee or wine or whatever else makes us happy*. No. This is a study in contrast between human nature and the nature of our good and gracious God. Selfishness vs. selflessness; coercive power vs. invitational love; personal protection and comfort vs. personal sacrifice and vulnerability in service to others. We won't always pass the test, but we can't pretend we don't know the right answers. Jesus, the Son of God, showed us the way of God. May Almighty God give us the desire for what is right and the strength and compassion to do it.