

Do You Really Believe?

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Luke 4:1-13

“...for forty days he was tempted by the devil.”

Movement 1 – Different Temptations

We are surrounded by temptations. We are surrounded by lures, by moment and items of seduction, and by traps calling us to give in, to take just a little, and to enjoy the pleasures of life. We are surrounded by temptations. Just look around you, look at the objects here in the sanctuary, which ones are calling you and tempting you. (Note: in the sanctuary are objects to signify temptations, cake, alcohol, etc...) Just look around you in the world at all the things which tempt you. What is calling you to just give in? Look at the slightly nicer car, look at the slightly nicer home, the bigger screen television, the new shoes, the cake in the window, the computer in the catalogue, and ask yourself, are you tempted to give in? Turn on the television and you will face temptations. Commercials calling out to our sub-consciousness, calling out to that place where judgment does not rule (was that the ‘id’ or the ‘super-ego’ or the ‘shopper’s-ego’). A new toy that promises happiness, a new garden tool that promises flourishing greens, a new mop that promises to clean more and better than you ever expected, a drink promises that you will be popular, a car promises you will be happy. All are temptations driving at our wants and desires.

Have you ever seen the commercial for the ‘Miracle Blade’? It is a set of knives that slices dices and cuts through tin cans. The info-commercial is based on temptation. You are sold a temptation to make you a better cook because you will have better knives. You are persuaded to believe that you will save money because you can cut your own deli meat with these wonder blades. You are tempted to buy the product because it promises a better, a more productive, a happy, a more American, and a super powerful life. Buy this set of knives because your cooking will increase, and you will be able to protect you family. Like meats in a sandwich, the temptations are layered thick so that all the viewers will have a place where he or she is pulled, lured, and suckered into buying a set of knives.

You know what it is like to be tempted. You hear the voices saying, “Yes, yes,” to your inner-consciousness and you have a difficult time saying “no.” You feel the pull, you make the justifications and you are captured by temptation. We all deal with temptation, with desire, with a want for something more, better, shiny and flashy. We try to stomp our feet and say no, we grit our teeth and look the other way, and we clench our fist and try to stay strong when faced by the pull and the power of temptations. Mark Twain who once said, “I deal with temptation by yielding to it,” and maybe we follow Twain’s lead and indulge. We give in and say we’ll start again tomorrow, we slip and justify, and we indulge. The temptations constantly pull at us, compel us and often shape our existence. We all face, we are all surrounded by temptations.

Movement 2 – The Many Temptations of Christ

Today we witness Christ’s temptations. Christ was driven to the wilderness by the Holy Spirit and he was tempted, he was lured, and he was tested. Christ wrestled with the devil and wrestled with himself. Today we witness Christ’s temptations.

We may find it to be a relief to know that Christ was tempted. We may find it assuring to know that Christ was human enough to want, to desire, and to be lured towards that which would not be best. We may find ourselves connecting with Christ at this moment, realizing that as Christ is tempted his humanity is proclaimed. Christ was human as we are human, and Christ faced temptations as we would face temptations. The commentator, Alfred Plummer, suggests that the temptations of Christ give us the assurance that Christ could sympathize with us in our own temptations. This is to give us hope that when we face temptations, Christ

understands and sympathizes with us; especially when we give in. Yet I would suggest that along with this assurance that Christ sympathizes with us is the assurance that we can sympathize with Christ in his own humanity. Here we find that Christ is human, here we are given the assurance that Christ is one of us, and we can understand what he was going through. We can journey with Christ into the wilderness and experience the temptations with him. So as we hear about Christ's temptations, journey with Christ and experience the temptations with him. Let the Holy Spirit carry you, let the Holy Spirit open your eyes, and sit with Christ in the wilderness.

Maybe you can relate because you are in your own wilderness right now due to your own life circumstances. Maybe you are surrounded by so much chaos, by so much grief and so much uncertainty that you feel like you are in a desert land, a barren place on the margins of the world. You are facing difficulties at work, and the stress is holding you down. You are feeling pressures in your family, with your loved ones, and the anxiety is tearing you apart. You are feeling the pressures of school and from friends, the pressures are more than you feel you can handle and you find yourself crying in the loneliness – you are in the wilderness.

Maybe you are struggling with lose of a life, with lose of a hope, or with lose of a dream and the tears cloud your vision of anything but the barren land. You are in the wilderness, you are surrounded by grief, and you can imagine that you are suffering and sitting with Jesus.

Then the pain begins. Then the hunger begins to gnaw at our stomach, at our very being. We begin to get hungry. We begin to get famished. We know what it is like to be hungry. We know what it is like to skip a meal. We can imagine what Jesus must have been feeling. Or maybe the pain is deeper; maybe the pain is from your own wilderness. It is a hunger for security, it is a hunger for companionship, it is a hunger for peace, it is a hunger for love, and the pain of hunger is great.

Jesus could take this rock, he could take this stone, this part of the earth and make it bread. Jesus could take something which is nothing and make it into something with sustenance. Jesus could feed himself, could end the pains of hunger and give himself peace. Do you feel the pull? Do you feel the temptation? Would not you do the same? We face the temptation with Jesus.

Or maybe Jesus thinks about what he needs to do. Jesus will be going out to the world to share a message. Jesus will be going out to try to convince people to follow him. It will be difficult work, it will be trying work. What if he just listened to the seductive slur of Satan's hiss and gave in to have control? What if he just listened to the devil and accepted control over all the lands – wouldn't that make life easier? Think of the people you work with, you deal with, and you wrestle with. What if they just did what you say? What if they just followed your words without asking? How many times have you found yourself saying to yourself or out loud, if you just did what I say, everything would be fine? Maybe then the stress in your home would be relieved. Maybe then the anxiety at work would be released. Maybe then you would find some peace. What a temptation it would be to have people listen to you without always questioning you. Do you feel the temptation with Jesus?

Maybe Jesus then thinks about his religious work before him. Maybe then he thinks about the struggle he will have trying to convince the people of the temple to believe and follow. If only he could give a sure sign, a lock-in-the-box sign that no one could question. Then his life would be much, much easier. Then his work would be assured. A flash of lightening from his eyes, fire from his finger, or jumping off a high point only to be caught by the servants of the Lord. That would offer the assurance the people would be looking for. It makes sense, to give that kind, that powerful type of sign. If we were endowed with a power, wouldn't we want to show others that we have it? If we were given protection, wouldn't we want to jump from high places so others will follow us no matter what? It would give us authority, it would give us power, and it would give us a place in society that others would recognize. Do you feel the temptation with Jesus?

Today we witness the temptations with Jesus. Today we see the humanity of Christ rise to the top. Today we can sit and experience the temptations with Jesus. Do you feel the temptations; are you also in the wilderness with Jesus?

Movement 3 – Justifying Christ’s Temptations

These are temptations that make sense. These are temptations that are logical. There are temptations to smoke a pack of cigarettes, or eat a whole chocolate cake – neither of those actions makes sense. These are temptations that seem rational, logical and perhaps the best way to go. I have already alluded to the ways in which these temptations make sense, but let’s go a little further. Perhaps there is a deeper temptation that is rooting all three, something that is pulling at Christ the entire time he is in the wilderness.

The Biblical scholar Fred Craddock suggests that this conversation between Jesus and Satan is very similar to the conversation between Eve and Satan in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). The devil is presenting the rational argument, the reasonable argument. It makes sense to eat the fruit; it will only lead to good, to knowledge and a likeness of God. In Milton’s classic epic poem *Paradise Lost*, the devil whispers into Eve’s ear, and she awakens with desire. It is a desire for more, for what is best, for what seems right. Why would it be wrong to eat the fruit when the desire is so strong?

Perhaps that is the temptation that Jesus is facing as well; a desire for what seems best and what seems right. Perhaps that is the deeper, the pulling temptation, and the desire for the better way. These temptations each offer what seems to be a better, a more excellent way,

Craddock suggests that each of the three temptations speak to different levels of Christ’s ministry, each connecting to Christ’s desire to reach his people. Turning stones into bread is a wonderful and powerful gift. Think what Christ could do with this power. He could feed the masses, he could cure hunger. With this power, Christ could meet so many of the social ills of the world. Why not give in? Why not start now and continue to feed many, many others? Why not use his divine powers to cure all of the social ills of the world. Christ does have a great desire for his people to be fed, clothed and cared for. Yet we, as humans, have made enough of a mess, perhaps the only way out would be for God to clean up our social ills in one divine sweep. Would not this be a more effective way?

What about the next temptation? Having power over all the kingdoms? Christ is heralding a new kingdom, a rule of God. Would it not make sense to have power over all others? This is a political temptation that is offered to Jesus. With this kind of power, Jesus could spread his word of God’s republic with ease. With this kind of power, Christ could enforce the ethics and the glory of God’s kingdom without difficulty. Every time we have tried to set up a church-state government it has ended in oppression and violence. Christ has a desire for all to be a part of the Kingdom of God, but we seem to have a difficult time spreading that Kingdom. Yet if Christ was in power, than surly things would go well, so why not give in and accept this temptation of total control?

What about the third temptation? What about this religious temptation to show himself at the temple. Wouldn’t we all like to know for sure that Christ is Lord? Wouldn’t we all like to know for sure that Christ is indeed the Son of God? This religious temptation calls Christ to give the people the sign that they keep requesting. This religious temptation calls our Savior to give us the tangible assurance so that we will never doubt again. With such an assurance, wouldn’t it be that much easier to bring others to Christ? With such a divine sign, wouldn’t it be that much more likely that all would turn to Christ. Christ desires that all people will follow him; this is a great way to convince them to follow. Why not give in and accept this temptation?

Do you see the depth and the difficulty of these temptations? These are temptations that seem rational, that seem logical and make sense. It would help out Christ’s ministry to give into these temptations. It would move things along; it would feed so many desires. Maybe you can feel the anguish that is pulling at Christ.

Maybe you can experience the hunger and the desire in the depth of your own being. These are temptations that are difficult to turn away from. These are temptations that make sense.

Movement 4 – Our Temptations

We face temptations that make sense. We face temptations that we can justify, that we see as logical and rational. We face temptations that make sense and we are drawn to them. After all, when you are in that wilderness, when you are in that barren land, wouldn't you want to find the easiest and the quickest way out? When you are struggling, wouldn't you want to give in to the most efficient and easiest path to change? Wouldn't you want to find the sugar coated pill that would assure you things would improve? Think of all of the short cuts that we see, hear about, and experience in the world. One big example is steroids. A young man or woman wants to excel in a sport, wants to do well and is tempted to take steroids or other kinds of drugs because then he or she will improve, will excel, and will win. The temptation is there, but you can imagine the justification that goes through individual's minds when considering whether or not to give into the temptation. Think of individual's who use drugs or alcohol as an escape from the harsh reality of life. Think of students who cheat on exams or on papers. Think of executives who "cook the books" to make the company look like it is doing well. In all of these examples, we can imagine the mind justifying the action, rationalizing the action, and making the temptation seem rational and logical. The temptations make sense.

We face our short-cut temptations, our temptations that make sense. You are grieving with a loss, and that loss brings you into a wilderness that leaves you alone with the grief. Yet if you just bury your head in your work, if you just make yourself smile, if you just try to forget your pain, if you force yourself to be happy, then you will be able to find your way out of the wilderness, then you can return to a normal life. Even though you haven't given the due time necessary for your grief, even though the wounds are still very real, the temptation to ignore grief is strong.

Or if your family feels like it is tearing apart, and you find yourself in a wilderness of despair and fear. Yet you realize that if you bury your own frustrations, your own worries and do everything possible to be that solid rock for your family, if you try to hold the family together, then you may be able to leave the wilderness. Even though you are sacrificing your own health and well being, the temptation is strong, and the desire is strong to follow this logical temptation.

Faust was tempted by the devil in his search for the true essence of life, and makes a deal with the devil. In the beginning of Dante's inferno, we find Dante in the dark woods of his life. In is lost, depressed and weighed down with morass. As Dante looks up he sees on the top of a mountain a light that is shining brightly and is so inviting. It is a light that represents happiness, fullness, and peace. Dante wants to just run up the mountain to the light and to salvation. He wants to take the short cut out of his darkness but is told that he has to take the long and difficult journey through the very pit of hell and back again. In the movie *The Third Man* Orson Well's morally ambivalent character Harry Lime is looking to make money fast, any way possible and gives into the temptation to sell adulterated penicillin. He takes a short cut to meet his desire.

We all face temptations to cut the corners, to take the easy route, justifying and rationalizing our actions. We say with Machiavelli that the ends will justify the means, as we give into the temptations. We say that this last cigarette smoke will make us steady. We say that this drink will help us relax so we can help more people. I am reminded by the play *Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S. Eliot, about the real life character, Thomas Beckett. In this play, Beckett is tempted to become a close acquaintance with the King, wedding the church and the state; giving power to the state over the church. After facing temptations which mirror the temptations Christ faced, Beckett replies, "The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason."

We are faced by temptations which we can justify, which we can rationalize. We can relate with Christ's temptations, not because we know what it is like to be hungry, but because we know what it is to want what is best, even if the path is not the best. We are lured, we are pulled, and we are seduced into giving into these

temptations, these easy routes out of the wilderness, to a better, easier, and more productive life. We have faced our own logical, rational temptations.

Movement 5 – Christ’s Stubbornness

Yet Christ stands strong and says, “No.” Christ resists the temptations, Christ resists the urge, Christ says, “no.” With Scripture as his strength, his assistance, and his aid, Christ refuses to follow the lure of the devil. With the Word of God on his lips, Christ refuses to follow the desire. It would be easy to just feed the world, but that is not the way of the Lord, for the Lord has a greater bread to give to the world and it cannot be made from stone. It would be easy to just control the entire world, but that is not the way of the Lord, for such control and such power would only lead to a worship of that control and power, not worship of God. It would be easy to just show the sign that he is truly the Son of God but that is not the way of the Lord, for such supernatural signs and tests and temptations of God, and leave little room for faith. All the time the Holy Spirit is with Christ, never leaving him. In those moments of temptation, in those moments of trial, the Holy Spirit stays with him, calling him to a different way, a better way. Christ is still tempted, but says no.

Christ stays true to his convictions, Christ stays true to his calling, and says no. It is almost as if he has his eyes on a different prize than that which the devil strings before him. It is almost as if he is looking towards a different, a deeper desire, one that does not control, one that does not have power, but one that enters into a full relationship with the children of Israel.

Remember how I talked about the humanity of Christ. Here, in this moment, the humanity of Christ show us the way to the divinity of the Lord. It is the divine strength that is in the person of Christ that gives him the strength to say no. It is the divine wisdom to understand the work he is called to do that gives him the strength to say no. It is in a divine faith of God and of humanity that we will hear the Word, that we will follow Jesus without the religious parlor tricks, the display of power, or the panacea miracles solving all the woes of the world. Here, in this resistance to temptation, the humanity of Christ shows us the path to trusting in God. Christ shows us how to say no to the world, no to the devil, and yes to God. Karl Barth writes that in Christ’s humanity we see the divinity of the Lord, and we are called to live in the way God intends for us to live. We are freed to say no to the temptations and yes to God.

This is the key, in saying no to the devil and yes to the Lord; Christ was placing his trust in the Lord. Sure, feeding the world would seem easy, but Christ trusted that God’s plan would be just as good if not better. Controlling the world would be an easy way to hearken the kingdom of God, but Christ trusted that God’s plan would be just as good in not better. Showing the sign that we all desire would give people the surety they need, but Christ was trusting that God’s plan would be just as good if not better. Christ was trusting in God’s wisdom, in God’s presence, and said no to the easy the quick way out. Christ stood strong and said “no.”

Movement 6 – Our Faith in God

Can we do the same? Can we also trust God, and say “no” to that which tempts us. Even if it seems like we are taking the longer road, even if it seems like we are taking the harder path, can we also trust God? For this seems to be a big part of Christ’s ministry and of our lives. Maybe we are in the wilderness of grief; can we trust God that we will find our way out of that grief in a time that is fitting and right? Can we trust God that the pain will eventually subside? Can we trust God that the quick and easy way is not the way that God calls us to live? Can we trust God?

I know that many of us are in a wilderness right now. Many of us want out, we want relief, and we want to feel better, yet find little hope. You are surrounded by temptations to give in, to give up and to follow other whims. I am asking you to follow the example of Christ, and trust God. Stay strong in prayer; stay strong in your faith (as strong as you can) and stay with God.

Think of the church that has no future. Or so says the world. It is a church with limited resources. It is a church with a struggling congregation. It is a small church that, on the surface has little to offer. This church could take the easy way out of the wilderness and close. This church could sell its own sense of identity and become what others want it to be. This church could find some kind of quick and easy way out. Or the people of this church could trust God. The people of this church could take each day as it comes. The people of this church could do service as it is called to serve. The people could worship each day as if it were its last service and trusting that God will handle tomorrow. Then the church will truly live. The theologian, Stanley Hauerwas claims that most of our society is afraid of dying, and so we never live. We fear dying in any way if it is not controlled. But if we embrace death, and give that to God, then we can begin to live without fear. When we live in order to die, then we will truly live trusting that God will be with us in our lives, guiding and helping us all to way.

It comes down to faith. Do you believe that God's way is the best way? Do you believe that the path-leading straight through the wilderness is the path we are called to walk? Do you believe?

We are called to believe, to really believe that God will find a way out of no way. We are called to believe, to really believe that God will stay with us, even when the waves of despair hit, even when the tides of desire threaten to pull us down. We are called to believe, to really believe that we will be led out of the wilderness, but it will be in God's time and in God's way.

Christ fed the world through the cross. Christ brought about the kingdom of God through the cross. Christ showed us the glory of the Son of God through the cross. It is not easy, it is not quick, but it is the way of the Lord. Let us stay with the Lord. Let us listen to the Holy Spirit, and believe that God will guide us out of the wilderness and into the promise land. Let us really believe in the grace of the Lord.

So struggle with your temptations and trust in God. Wrestle with your pangs of hunger and trust in God. Embrace your doubt, and then suspend it and believe that God will stay with you and guide you through that more excellent way. We may have valleys ahead of us, but the Lord will stay with us. We may enter onto a rocky road but the Lord will stay with us. We may face a deeper, more profound wilderness but the Lord will stay with us. Trust in God, walk with God and follow God through the wilderness, past the temptations and into the day of the resurrection, the moment when all things are made new, into the glory land.

AMEN