

Lent 1B
Luke 4:1-13
March 9, 2025

“The Temptations”
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Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.”’ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.”’ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, “God will command the angels concerning you, to protect you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

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Struggling to make ends meet on a first-call salary, the pastor was livid when he confronted his wife with the receipt for a \$250 dress she had bought. "How could you do this?!" "I was outside the store looking at the dress in the window, and then I found myself trying it on," she explained. "It was like Satan was whispering in my ear, 'You look fabulous in that

dress. Buy it!" "Well," the pastor replied, "You know how I deal with that kind of temptation. I say, 'Get behind me, Satan!'" "I did," replied his wife, "but then he said, 'It looks fabulous from back here, too!'"¹

Let's be honest, we've all been there. We've all been tempted by something or someone. And if we're *really* honest, we've all caved. Hopefully not all the time, but we can certainly relate. It's possible that we don't personify temptation quite the way the author of Luke's gospel does, as a devil testing or enticing us. But we've all experienced temptation and even given in to temptation, nonetheless.

Even the three specific temptations of Jesus are relatable. Who among us has not been tempted to take a shortcut, to take the easy way out, to yield to instant gratification? Jesus was hungry and the devil presented him here with a quick fix – turn a stone into bread. Then he showed Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world” and promised him glory and authority in exchange for worship. Who among us has not felt the allure of unearned power or renown? And then, taking him to the pinnacle of the temple, the devil urged Jesus to jump and show the world that he was special, that angels would rescue him, that he was invincible. Who among us has not longed for validation, longed for others to know that we are special? These temptations – instant gratification, unearned power, validation – we've likely faced these before. People have always faced them. But why?

Similar to the author of Luke, the second century Christian text, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, imagines that every person is accompanied by two angels: the angel of righteousness and the angel of iniquity. When righteousness, modesty, chastity, bountifulness, forgiveness, charity, and piety come to our hearts, we can know that the angel of righteousness is with us. However, when bitterness, anger, and foolishness come into our hearts, or envy, pride, drunkenness, a loose tongue, or excessive ambition, we can know that this is the angel of iniquity.² It reminds me of the

¹ "Dress Temptation," Beliefnet.com: <https://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/videojokes/jokes/christian/d/dress-temptation.aspx>.

² "Shepherd of Hermas: Command IV," Sacred-texts.com: <https://sacred-texts.com/bib/lbob/lbob27.htm>.

cartoon images of an angel on one shoulder and a demon on the other, voices in our heads urging us toward goodness or temptation.

But the devil of Luke's gospel reminds me more of the figure found in the ancient Hebrew text of Job. This character is a member of the heavenly court whose job it is to test the faith and goodness of humans. Poor Job loses everything – his children, his wealth, his health – all to see if the devil could tempt him to renounce his seemingly unshakeable faith in God. It didn't work though. If only we could all resist temptation like Job.

Psychologists tell us that there is a reason that resisting temptation is so difficult. “Self-regulation, our strength to inhibit impulses, make decisions, persist at difficult tasks, and control emotions can be spent just like a muscle that has been lifting heavy weights. When we spend our strength on one task (trying to control your emotion around a petulant boss), there is less to spend on others (avoiding the Ben & Jerry's when we get home).”³ It's not a devil sitting on your shoulder that leads us into temptation, just a finite supply of self-regulation.

A study from a few years ago by the Barna Group found that 60% of American participants were tempted to worry and procrastinate, 55% of participants were tempted to eat too much, 44% were tempted to spend too much money and to spend too much time on media, and 41% were tempted to be lazy or not work as hard as they should. Half of all respondents admitted that they don't actually know why they give in to their temptations. Other responses to the question of why include escape from “real life,” to feel less pain, to satisfy others' expectations, a shortcut to success, lack of willpower, human or sinful nature, and simply because the respondents enjoy it.⁴

³ “Listen to your heart: Psychologists Discover a Physiological Indicator of Vulnerability to Temptation,” Psychologalscience.org, March 21, 2007: <https://www.psychologalscience.org/news/releases/listen-to-your-heart-psychologists-discover-a-physiological-indicator-of-vulnerability-to-temptation.html>.

⁴ Barna Group. “New Research Explores the Changing Shape of Temptation,” Barna.com, January 25, 2013:

The fact of the matter is, we may not agree on its origins, but temptation is real and we will face it. So how can we improve our chances at being victorious over our temptations? We might take a few cues from Jesus. In the story, Jesus beat the devil and defeated his temptations, not because he was perfect, but because he knew who he was and who he wasn't; because he understood the nature of his calling and what he was to be about in the world; and because he accepted that there was no short cut to living it out. It's not a guarantee that we'll never yield to temptation, but knowing who we are, what we're about, and being willing to put in the work to get there, is a solid start to coming out victorious when temptation knocks.

And one more thing: coming out victorious isn't *just* possible when we don't yield to our temptations. It's also possible when we do and we learn from our mistakes. It doesn't really help to beat ourselves up when we fail. It's far better to learn from the experience and commit to doing things differently the next time around. Because there will be a next time.

As we walk through the wilderness of our own lives and as we face temptation in many forms, may we know who we are, deep down. May we know what we're about. May we have the tenacity to do what it takes to get there. And when we fail, may we give ourselves the grace we need to try again. Amen.