

Lent 1C: Luke 4:1-13  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **On the Devil's Terms**

If you are the Son of God...then act like it! That's the temptation Satan puts to Jesus. Be the Messiah, the Savior and do it the way we want you to be.

This temptation comes to Jesus immediately following his baptism. At this point, Jesus hasn't done anything. He's performed no miracles, given no sermons, no teachings before he's sent out into the wilderness, far from any other human being, alone with himself, with his thoughts and fears, and of course with the Devil.

And the Devil sees his chance. The Devil is nothing if not an opportunist, always looking for an opening, when a person is at their weakest, when they're tired or lonely or hungry. And Jesus is very weak here, having gone forty days without food or water or human company. And the Devil...it doesn't matter if you think of him as a sinister supernatural being or a representation of the dark side of the human psyche, the effect is the same—he tempts Jesus: Turn these stones into bread. Take charge of the empires of the world and their armies. Show off your divinity, your connection to God.

Now, *we* know, being clued-in by the author Luke, that these were temptations from the Devil. But I expect they did not come smelling of brimstone or bearing a return address of hell, and so their satanic source wasn't immediately obvious. And, to be honest, as temptations go, the ones put to Jesus are not particularly wicked or immoral. They are not temptations to take money out of the company till or to give in a sin of the flesh, a romantic encounter in some darkened bar. Nor is he being tempted to indulge in some illegal substance. To the contrary, the things the Devil suggests are ostensibly good things.

I mean, isn't bread good? Don't people need bread? Don't we as caring, concerned people have a responsibility to feed hungry people? Think what the world would be like if we had the capacity to turn stones into bread! Likewise, isn't political power a good thing? Our newspapers are full of accounts of various politicians who, through their laws and legislation and programs, are attempting to work good through politics. Sure, political power is not always used for good, but it can be. Even showing off his divine protection is a good thing. Wouldn't the job of evangelism, of convincing others of Jesus, be easier if we had some irrefutable, visible, undeniable proof to show to skeptics, to give to people who ask, Where is your God? Had Jesus done as the Devil suggested, it would arguably have made his case for divine sonship, for messianic authority much easier to make. And isn't that a good thing? Wouldn't that be useful to the cause?

So what's wrong with what the Devil is suggesting? In mean, nothing he encourages is directly at odds with Jesus' mission. He never suggests Jesus renounce his call, avoid responsibility, or deny his baptism. The Devil is content to leave Jesus' identity unchallenged. Instead, the Devil's temptations come at him from the side, at an angle. God declared Jesus to be his beloved Son,

ok, but he didn't say what that meant, didn't say how he was supposed to go about his messianic work. And that leaves the Devil an opening, a way to wheedle himself into Jesus' thoughts: "You know, Jesus, there's a better, easier, more efficient, less dangerous way to be the Son of God. Satisfy people's base hungers, claim all worldly power for God, give people no reason to doubt. Do the things people expect from a god. Give the people what they want."

But here is where we see the corruption at the heart of the Devil's temptations. It's the old "the ends justify the means" argument, the belief that the way you get to the goal isn't as important as getting there. As long as your intentions are good, as long as you are fighting for a good cause, it doesn't matter what you do to achieve your goal, what costs you incur. Achieving your good aim may come at the expense of the freedom of others (but they don't really know what's best for themselves, anyway), or through deception (what's a "useful lie" among friends?) or as the means to another end, such as elevating your status in the eyes of others (there's nothing like claiming the mantle of compassion and justice to make yourself look good). But that's alright. It's just collateral damage on the way to a better world.

But Jesus resists the Devil's temptations. He gives a definitive, scripture-backed No to each temptation. Why? Because he sees through them, recognizes them for what they are—invitations to do good things in the wrong way. Each temptation is wrapped around something good: feed a lot of people, evangelized by miracle, rule the world justly. But to take that route, to follow those suggestions, Jesus recognizes, would be to betray his mission. It would be to separate *who* he is from *how* he is, separate his *aims* from the *means* he uses to get there. It would mean submitting to carrying out his charge the world's way, to use bullying and deceit and manipulation to achieve his goals. And no matter how "well" one does that, no matter how much "good" is accomplished, Jesus recognizes, this cannot be God's way. You cannot do the Lord's work in the Devil's way.

This is an important lesson, but it is one we Christians have not learned well. Indeed, Jesus' followers have routinely compromised our methods for the sake of success: reducing ministry to a matter of meeting "felt needs," using the instruments of government to coerce and secure power, resorting to spectacles to attract newcomers. We might think of different periods in church history or different church traditions as being more susceptible to one or another of these enticements—"seeker friendly" churches and social gospel churches that aim to meet people's needs, material or psychological; medieval churches, the Religious Right, and liberal Protestants today who try to use government power to advance religious aims; Pentecostals who are preoccupied with "signs and wonders." We might enjoy pointing fingers at our "pet denominational rivals," but the truth is we Christians are all tempted to stray from our calling, to reduce our work to something the world understands as worthy, to define God and God's actions according to our needs rather than God's priorities.

But the story of Jesus' temptation reminds us that, while the God we believe in does care about us and does meet our needs, a large part of what Jesus came to do was to challenge and change those needs, to expand our limited conceptions of both ourselves and what God can do in us. It is not uncommon that we come to worship on Sundays bearing our concerns—concerns for our health, for a wayward child, for a financial setback—hoping God will address them. But we find—thank God—that church is more interesting than our expectations, and we leave, not with

our concerns addressed, but with a whole new set of concerns. What I thought was my biggest problem is revealed to be not so important, and I discover problems I never knew I had before I met Jesus. Here I thought my biggest problem was a spat I had with a coworker, but really what I need is to be more concerned about my neighbor who is hungry and alone. Or, I came worried about not having enough money, but really my problem is I don't care enough about those who've never known Jesus.

You see, the temptation to reduce God's aims to the world's expectations, is not just something Jesus faced; we face that temptation too. We often come to God as we come to every other human experience, with the question, What do I want? What will I get out of this? What good will this do me? But to approach God that way is to restrict his action, to limit what God will do. We know God is good for filling our bellies, controlling the world and providing some excitement in our lives, but beyond that, we don't really need him. He has no larger purpose than that. And so we get what we need, or *think* we need, from God, but our fundamental beliefs, our priorities, our concerns remain unchanged.

Jesus shows the folly of this belief in how he responds to the second temptation. The Devil offers him worldly power if he only bows down before him, but Jesus counters with, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Jesus gets it right. When it comes down to it, it's all a matter of what you worship, what you honor and hold to be the highest, the most important. We often think that how we go about achieving our aims doesn't matter, they don't have any bearing on what we worship. We can bully or cheat or manipulate others, so long as it's for a good cause, and we can go on worshipping God. But the reality is, the object of our worship is shown in how we live. We may say we worship God, but our preoccupation with security or efficiency or ease or looking good shows us what it is we really worship.

In rejecting the Devil's overtures, Jesus challenges us to take him not on our terms, but on God's, to see him not only as the Son of God but the *way* to God, not only as the Truth but also as the pattern for how we live that truth out. He shows us that, just as we cannot do the Lord's work the Devil's way, we cannot separate the way we live from the God we worship. Growing as a Christian is thus about learning to conform our life to our worship, about disciplining ourselves to not put our needs front and center, but to bend our lives toward God, about asking not, "What good can God do for me?" but rather, "What does God want from me?"

Indeed, we have gathered here, not simply to praise God and then go home feeling better. We are here to learn how to be of better use to God. 'Church,' we are to understand, is not a technique for getting what we want out of God, but is the primary way God has chosen to get what He wants out of us. And what God wants out of us is to live a life not on the world's terms, but on God's, just as Jesus did.

As we head into the season of Lent, Jesus invites us to trust God, to trust in *his* wisdom, to follow *his* way. There are many ways to live life, to get ahead, to get things done, but Jesus offers a better way, *his* way. To be sure, his way is not a matter of flair or expediency, it is not a way that will garner a lot of praise and attention. Worst of all, it is a way that leads ultimately to the cross. Yet it is the same way that leads to eternal life, for those who follow it. May God grant us

grace to follow his way during this holy season of Lent, and wherever it takes us on the other side. Amen.