

Testing God

Luke 4:1-13

The first Sunday of Lent always includes the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness by the devil. The temptations he uses aren't what we usually think of as powerful temptations. Often when we think of temptations in our own lives we think of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. But Satan doesn't tempt Jesus with any of those. Instead, he tempts Jesus with bread, power, and safety. He tempts Jesus to doubt God's word. He tempts Jesus to put God to the test.

Temptations come from questioning God's word, from testing God's commands. It started that way in the Garden of Eden, when the serpent asked Eve, "Did God actually say...?" We still do that. We still test God, wondering if God's commands still apply to us today. Sometimes, when we don't get struck by lightning, we think we're ok. We think we've tested God, and found out things aren't like we thought, that God's word isn't true. But the damage to us often comes later.

The reason the first temptation is to get us to doubt God's word and what it says about is that words matter. Because words help us define our reality. They help us explain reality. And if we don't use God's words, we try to take the place of God, in creating our own realities instead of the one God has created.

We don't have the ability to create our own realities with words when we're driving. Yes, we'll often think of speed limits as mere suggestions, but that doesn't change what happens when we get pulled over. Many years back I was hit by a car who was at a stop sign, while I didn't have a stop sign. They had stopped, yet began to pull forward as I had the

right of way. According to the accident report, the other driver thought she only had to stop for a little bit, not remain stopped until the intersection was clear. Words and definitions matter.

We see this in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, too. President Putin tried to define Ukraine as a part of Russia, as a creation of Russia, that therefore gave him the right to invade and control. The people of Ukraine, even those who have some cultural ties to Russia, didn't see things the same way.

When the devil tempts Jesus, that's what is happening. The devil is trying to redefine words. The devil is trying to define reality, instead of letting God's words define reality. Immediately before, Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. The Holy Spirit had descended on him like a dove, and the voice from heaven had said "You are my beloved Son; with You I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Jesus' identity had been confirmed. Reality had been defined. Jesus was clearly described as God's Son.

Yet it is right after that, right after his identity has been confirmed, right after it is clear who he is, that Jesus is sent into the wilderness. Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days, where he doesn't eat and faces temptations. Then, when He's at His weakest, the devil comes looking for Him. The devil comes to tempt Jesus, to test Jesus, to make him doubt who He is, what His mission is, and how God the Father cares for Him.

The devil's first temptation is to challenge Jesus to use his power for his own needs, to

make bread out of stones after he's been fasting in the wilderness for forty days. Jesus needs to eat. But he knows that his power is not to be used selfishly, for himself alone, but for others. But here, responding to the devil, Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, Moses' farewell sermon to the people of Israel when their forty years in the wilderness was coming to an end. And the part that Jesus quotes is about how God had been with the people of Israel, providing for them, giving them bread from heaven. God had showed them that he would provide for his people, but the people of Israel grumbled, complained, and didn't trust in God. Jesus, though, does show his trust in his Father.

Foiled once, the devil regroups and tries again. He takes Jesus and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and all of their splendors. "If You, then, will worship me, it will all be Yours." The devil is playing God, demanding the worship that belongs to God alone. Not only is God the only one who is to be worshiped, but God is the only one who can give power on Earth. The devil may claim that the kingdoms of the world have been delivered to him, but we know that God alone is in charge and in control. Jesus knows that, too, and so He replies, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.'"

Foiled yet again, the devil tries a third time and takes Jesus to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem, and again slanders him. "If You are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here..." And here we see another of the devil's tactics; he can quote Scripture, too. He quotes Psalm 91, "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." But the devil

here isn't just slandering Jesus. He's slandering God. He's testing God. He is planting a seed of doubt that God would really follow through on that promise.

But again, Jesus resists where the people of God had earlier fallen to temptation. He will not chance death just to test God. It's not that Jesus feared death. No, he knew that his death needed to mean something, and would be when and where God commanded it. As theologian Martin Franzmann put it, Jesus here proved that he was the "Son of God who would not leap from the temple at satanic suggestion but could at God's command leap from greater heights than the temple pinnacle to greater depths than the courtyard floor."

Jesus resisted the devil, and gives us the power to resist. More than that, he continued to resist the devil's temptations all the way to the cross, where the devil was defeated once and for all.

Jesus wouldn't make bread for himself, but he'd break bread to feed 4000 and 5000 people, and then, on the night before he was betrayed, he would take bread, break it, and give it to his disciples to eat. The Word of God and the bread would sustain them as it sustains us through our journey of life.

Jesus didn't take the power that the devil offered him. Instead, he gave up the power that he had as the Son of God and came to live among us. As Paul wrote in Philippians 2, Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Jesus didn't test whether God would keep him safe. He knew that he had to give up his own safety to do accomplish what God had called him to do. And so he refused to call down an army of angels to rescue him from the guards in the garden of Gethsemane. He refused to leave Jerusalem when everyone knew what would happen if he stayed. Instead of testing if God would keep him safe, he know that he had to do what God had called him to do, even when it wasn't safe.

Jesus knows who he is, and whose he is. He knows that he belongs to God, and not to the devil. Jesus doesn't let the devil's testing and tempting get him to doubt God's word and God's promises. He doesn't need to test God. And because we can trust Jesus, we know we can trust God's promises and God's word to us, as well.

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