

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
First Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 9, 2025**

**“For Forty Days He Was Tempted”
Luke 4:1-13**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

If you had to give examples of *temptations*, you'd probably come up with actions that are appealing but harmful. Sometimes a temptation is something that would benefit us, but would harm someone else: “They undercharged me—and for a moment there, I was tempted to keep quiet, but then I pointed out the error.” Sometimes a temptation is something that seems appealing, but would ultimately harm ourselves: “I was tempted to have cheesecake for breakfast, but then I thought, ‘I’m in my 40s now; I probably shouldn’t,’ so I had a kale smoothie.” We think of temptations as things that might seem appealing, but we know deep down they’d be harmful and wrong.

With that in mind, what then are we to make of our Gospel Lesson, “The Temptations of Jesus”? “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan,” we heard, “and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil” (vv. 1-2). In the original language, this is about testing Jesus – trying him and tempting him (πειράζω). But a question, in what follows, how are any of these temptations?

First we hear this: Jesus “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’” (vv. 3-4). That’s it; that’s the temptation: ‘you’re hungry, so turn a stone into bread.’ Now I’ve got to ask—at the risk of being, quite literally, the devil’s advocate—what’s so wrong with that? We think of temptations as appealing but harmful—but where’s the harm in making bread when you’re hungry? Unless you’re on a low-carb diet, eating bread is not normally a scandalous temptation! And what’s more, this is something that Jesus would go on to do, on a grand scale, in his ministry—miraculous making bread to feed the hungry...

“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’” (vv. 5-7). Of course, worshipping

anyone but God is unacceptable; and yet, the temptation seems to offer very good results... With all the suffering in the world around us, wouldn't it be wonderful for Jesus "to rule the world with justice" right now (Ringe)? One quick bargain with the devil, and this world would be set right...

"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, 'He will command his 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'" (vv. 9-11). Here the temptation is to make a dramatic display of divine power, to leap from a height and be saved by God, making God's faithfulness visible and unmistakable. And again, we can ask: what's so bad about that? Really, wouldn't it be good for everyone to see God save a life?

See, what's puzzling is that none of these are really what we'd likely call temptations. These don't seem that scandalous; and unlike temptations that seem appealing but really cause hurt and harm, these temptations don't seem all that harmful. These aren't temptations to steal or injure or anything like that. Obviously the tempter is bad, but the temptations themselves do look pretty beneficial: Jesus is tempted to satisfy his hunger with bread, to rule the world immediately, and to reveal God's power to rescue. These don't seem all bad. Quite the contrary! These temptations—by sustaining Jesus, enthroning Jesus, and revealing God's power in Jesus—these temptations seem like they could bring about plenty of good.

But it's the *appearance* of good that makes these temptations so dangerous. The sinless Son of God could never be tempted to do evil; but here, according to Luke, the Son of God was in fact tempted (πειραζόμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου [v. 2])—tempted to do what *seemed* good. These temptations could *seem* like they were beneficial, useful, good.

Yet notice what all these temptations involve; notice the common thread that runs through all three. In each of these temptations, the devil tempts Jesus to *exploit power*. Use your power to make bread or anything else you want; use your power to seize control of every kingdom and nation so you can rule right now; use your power so dramatically that no one could dare doubt your divinity ever again.

I'm reminded of something the Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote. He said: "We could not better describe and define the Devil than [...] th[e] idea of a self-based,

free, sovereign ability. This intoxicating thought of power is chaos [...]. That is the *opposite* of God [...]. ‘Power in itself’ is bad, is the end of all things.” Yet, he added, “God’s power is the power of order, the power of the ordering of His love [...]. God’s power is holy, righteous, merciful, patient, kindly power. [...] This power, God, is the power of His free love in Jesus Christ, activated and revealed in Him.”

See, the temptations offered by the devil are all about unmitigated *power*—about seizing and wielding power. Yet this is not the way of Christ, because the ministry of Christ is a ministry of weakness. As St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, “power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9). The biblical scholar Tom Wright explains it like this: “Jesus is indeed to become the world’s true lord, but the path to that status, and the mode of it when it arrives, is humble service, not a devilish seeking after status and power. [...] The power that Jesus already has, which he will [...] display [through] healings [...], is [...] for restoring others to life and strength, not for cheap stunts. His status as God’s son commits him, not to showy prestige, but to the strange path of humility, service, and finally death.”

The ministry of Jesus will be a ministry of God’s compassion revealed in weakness; but these temptations would have Jesus wield power. These temptations are about using power instead of embracing weakness—and *in that* lies the hidden and devastating underside of these temptations: the devil is tempting Jesus to bypass suffering and weakness; the devil is tempting Jesus to avoid the cross. These temptations are about Jesus using his power as the Son of God so that he can have everything, rule everyone, display glory—right now. But that is a path away from the humility of the cross; the temptation here is to choose power and privilege over suffering and weakness; the temptation is to bypass the cross.

So today, on this First Sunday in Lent, we remember, with awe and gratitude, that Jesus refused the way of power—and chose instead the way of weakness for our sake. We listen as Jesus rejects those temptations, firmly and faithfully: “Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone”’” (v. 4); “Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him”’” (v. 8); “Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”’” (v. 12). Faced with the temptation to choose power over weakness, Jesus refused; faced with the temptation to bypass the cross, Jesus chose instead the way that led to his death and to our redemption.

In our lives, we too may be tempted to privilege power. In politics, the powerful are worshiped and the weak are mocked; in pop culture, the powerful are

idolized and the weak are ignored. But this Lent, may we be inspired by Christ to resist temptations to privilege power, and instead to remember the presence of Christ amid our weakness. And so may we see that the way of Christ culminated in the glory of Easter—but led first through the way of weakness, as Christ refused the temptations of power and chose, for our sake, the path of the cross. Amen.