

Three Tests

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First Sunday in Lent (C)
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Text: Luke 4:1-13

Temptation. That word just carries an air of naughtiness, doesn't it? The actress Mae West once said, "I generally avoid temptation, unless I can't resist it."¹ We talk about being tempted to eat sweets or tempted to buy things in a store. The word "temptation" also brings to mind a more serious and dangerous draw toward being unfaithful in our relationships, or the lure of abusing alcohol or drugs as an escape from life's hardships. But even there when we use the word "temptation," it's about fenced-in pleasures that we want to have, but shouldn't. It's a longing for some good thing that is denied to us. For us, the word "temptation" puts all the emphasis on the prohibited thing. We want to say Yes, but we *should* say No. This is the "Just Say No" understanding of temptation.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a special season of preparation leading up to Easter, when we celebrate Jesus' victory over sin and death in his resurrection. The love that Jesus showed us was so great, and so costly, that we have to understand—more than understand, we have to *feel* deep in our bones—just why it is we need the gift he offers us. Christians have celebrated this season differently through the ages. The traditional practices are fasting, penitence, prayer and study of the scriptures, but also works of love. Part of what these disciplines do for us is to help us feel the pull of temptation, to wrestle with the impulses that so easily master us at other times, so that we can see just how much we need God's help, and how far short we fall without it.

But I don't think the "Just Say No" approach to temptation will get us there. I think you can guess why: we're not defined by our refusals. If someone asks me what I do, I don't say, "Well, I used to be a software developer, but I moved on from that." If someone asks me about my family, I don't say, "Living single just isn't for me." No—I explain myself in the affirmative: "I am a pastor," "I'm a husband and a father." What gives us our understanding of ourselves is not what we say *No* to, but what we say *Yes* to. If your spiritual life is defined by the things you shouldn't do, if it's *only* about turning down sweets or stuff or sex, then you're missing out.

That's why it's so important that we have the story of Jesus' three tests. Jesus is able to say No to the devil by saying Yes to trust in God alone, Yes to his calling as the humble suffering servant, Yes to following God's way and not his own, Yes to us, his friends, his sisters and brothers. The good news of today's scripture is not Jesus' No to the devil but his Yes to all these other things.

Jesus is led into the desert by the Holy Spirit right after his baptism. It says that he was tempted by the devil for forty days. It's not as though the devil left him alone and jumped him at the end. The scripture says that Jesus was being tempted throughout the whole time he was in the wilderness. But the story of the last three temptations begins at the end of the forty days.

Jesus is hungry. He hasn't had anything to eat. Not just his stomach, but every

1 Attr. Mae West. http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Mae_West

cell in his body is crying out for nourishment. He is in pain. And so the devil sidles up to him and says, "You don't have to be hungry. Didn't you hear a voice from heaven call you God's Son? If you wanted, you could turn these stones into bread with only a thought. Then you could eat and end this useless torment you're putting yourself through." Jesus says, "One does not live by bread alone."

What does he mean by that? You have to understand that here Jesus is speaking like a rabbi. The rabbis didn't have the whole system of chapters and verses that we have, but they did have the scriptures memorized. When they wanted to cite the scriptures they would quote part of the verse, just enough to jog the listener's memory to remember the whole thing. Jesus is making reference to Deuteronomy 8:3 here. It's part of a speech that Moses made to the people of Israel as they came to the end of their desert journey. In this speech, he's recounting the history of their journey and reminding them of what it means. Let me quote the whole verse for you, in case you don't have the book of Deuteronomy memorized the way Jesus did:

[God] humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

Jesus is saying that, like the hunger of the Israelites, his hunger has a purpose. It deepens his relationship with God. It helps him to understand that he needs God's constant care. When Jesus says No to turning the stones into bread, it's not because eating is a bad thing. It's because he's already said Yes to trusting God, Yes to trusting in God to take care of him.

Next, the devil shows Jesus a vision of all the kingdoms of the world. They can all be yours, the devil says. They belong to me, to give to whomever I want. I think it behooves us to pause here for a second to take this in. I don't want to get alarmist here, but I believe the devil just said he controls all the world's governments, and Jesus didn't challenge him on that point. Luke's story, by the way, is the only account that includes this bit of the dialog. I think at the very least it shows Luke's skepticism that secular government, the institutions that recognizably wield power and authority, can accomplish God's purposes in any lasting and final way.

The temptation here is for Jesus to wield this kind of power. To be a philosopher king, and a healer, a miracle-worker at that. To have a bully pulpit so that everyone in the whole world can hear his teaching. But it's clear even from the way the devil posed the temptation, isn't it, that he can only have this kind of power if he hopelessly compromises himself, setting aside his first allegiance to God. Jesus says No to this temptation, because he's already said Yes to a life of following God, honoring God, obeying God, and God alone, whatever it costs him.

For the last test, the devil brings Jesus up to the highest point on the Temple in Jerusalem, and he says, "So, you're God's Son, and you seem really sure that God's got your back. Doesn't the scripture say that God's angels will protect the righteous? Why don't you show all those people down there who you really are by flinging yourself down from here?" But Jesus knows that God's protection is meant for those who obey and follow God's way. Now, would you ever grab a life-vest and fling yourself over the rail on a cruise ship just because there's a reasonable chance they'd rescue you? No... That's not what the life-vest is for, and it's not why the crew of the ship is there. The purpose of the cruise is for the passengers—all of them—to enjoy themselves safely. That purpose is only hampered when someone flouts the rules and takes crazy risks, and the crew and other passengers would be justified in getting angry at this person. In

the same way, God promises to protect us so that we feel secure in doing what God calls us to do, not so that we can perform crazy stunts to boost our ego and fame. In other words, if you're not doing it God's way, then don't expect God to save you from yourself.

Jesus says No to this temptation because he's said Yes to God's way, the way that will lead him eventually back to Jerusalem, to the cross. He won't be held in awe and respected as God's Son then, but despised as a criminal and a rebel, and put to death. It won't be in a public place that God proves once and for all that Jesus is God's Son, but to a few women in the garden on Easter morning, to a few friends in a private room, and through the Spirit, to all the billions of believers since then who have come to understand that Jesus is risen. That's part of God's plan. Jesus says No to testing God's protection, because he has already said Yes to trusting that the God who loves him will fulfill God's purpose for him.

We all wrestle with temptation. Our temptations are a little different than the ones faced by Jesus, because God has a different purpose for us than for Jesus. God wants each one of us to embrace the forgiveness and new life that we have in Jesus, and to make these things visible and real in the way that we live every day, in the way we act in our families and neighborhoods, in the way we participate in institutions of commerce and government, in every aspect of our existence. God wants us to be humble and remember that we are sinners who need God's grace to live. God wants us to show the same love for our enemies that God had for us, when we were cut off and turned away from God. God wants us to forgive those who wrong us with the same long-suffering love God shows us when God forgives our sins. This is just the general shape—God's purpose for every individual is a little bit different. But you can bet that our temptations, whatever form they take, will try to side-track us from this purpose.

Wrestling with temptation is not a simple matter of willpower. It's not about just saying No. It's a question of holding on to those things we've said Yes to. What is it that God wants you to do and be? Do you see the beauty, the fullness of the kind of life God wants for you? Do you ache for it, hunger for it, thirst for it? Have you said Yes to it? If you've said Yes to this, if you keep this Yes in the back of your mind every morning when you get up, every time you walk in or out of a door, every time you lie down to sleep, then you will start to recognize those things that you need to say No to, so that you can hold onto your Yes.

Jesus held onto his Yes to God, Yes to us. He held on through temptation in the desert. He held on through the demands of his neighbors that he stay in their town, even though his mission meant going elsewhere. He held on through the rejection of all the religious authorities, the scribes and Pharisees. He held on to his Yes through crucifixion and the tomb. He held on to his Yes to God, Yes to us until that Yes echoed through the universe on Easter morning, and because Jesus held onto his Yes, we also have a Yes to hold onto.

Let us pray...

God, we thank you that your Son Jesus Christ said Yes to trusting you, obeying you, and following your way. We thank you that he triumphed over temptation and followed your way to the cross. We thank you that you said Yes to him, raising us to new life and giving us a Yes that we can hold onto as we face all the voices that compete with yours for our attention. Give us your Holy Spirit, so that we can say Yes to you, and through that Yes say No to everything less than glorifying and enjoying you forever. Amen.