

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
February 14, 2016

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Rev. John F. Koerner

Luke 4:1-13

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. (Luke 4:1-1 N.R.S.V.)

Tempting Jesus

The little boy was caught peeking through a crack into the girl's bathroom. His mother gave him a stern lecture which ended with: "If you keep looking like that, you will go blind."

A few days later the little boy was caught once again peeping through the crack into the girl's bathroom. His mother scolded him, "Didn't I tell you that if you keep doing that you will go blind?"

"Yes."

"So why are you still doing it?"

"Well, I thought I would just do it until I needed glasses."

Our scripture lesson for today is about temptations. No matter how old we are or how holy we are, the temptations keep coming. Luke wants us to know that even Jesus was tempted, but unlike us, he did not find excuses to give in to the temptations.

Jesus was about to start his public ministry. So he spent time alone with God, wrestling with questions of identity. He already knew that he was to be the messiah. The voice from heaven at his baptism had confirmed that. The question now was, what kind of messiah?

Every year we read this selection as we enter the season of Lent, the six weeks leading up to Easter. The traditional interpretation of this passage reminds us that we will be tempted as Jesus was tempted. We should resist temptation as Jesus resisted temptation.

That is certainly a valid interpretation. Wil Willimon in his commentary on this text, suggests a different question. He suggests that these days, we are the ones who are tempting Jesus to be a different kind of messiah. Just like the crowds back then wanted Jesus to fulfill their expectations and be a military kind of messiah. So we today, want Jesus to fit himself to our expectations, rather than us fitting ourselves to his expectations.

It is an intriguing idea and I invite you to look with me at the text through that lens.

The first temptation was for Jesus to turn stones into bread. He had been fasting for a long time. Now his fast was over and he was hungry. There are in that part of the world, numerous small round rocks. To a hungry man, they might easily look like loaves of bread.

Jesus refused to turn the rocks into bread. He quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, saying, "One does not live by bread alone." Matthew expands that quotation to include, "But by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The temptation was for Jesus to gear his ministry to earthly needs. There were so many starving people in the land. Jesus could have spent his whole life just making sure that everyone had enough food to eat. That would have been a good thing in two senses. The crowds would have loved him, and he would not have been a threat to the religious leaders. So he could have lived to be an extremely popular old man.

Jesus had the power to turn the rocks into bread. There is no doubt of that. At the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus multiplied one boy's small lunch into enough to feed thousands. After that great crowds followed Jesus, they did so not to hear him proclaim the kingdom of God, but rather so that he would feed them.

People today still try to bargain with Jesus for physical comfort. The so called "prosperity gospel," says that you can make a deal with Jesus so that you will never have to suffer or be in want. We still tempt Jesus to be our kind of messiah. "Lord, if you will just give me a better paying job, I'll be your devoted follower for life."

"Lord, if you will just give me a good jump shot, a 90 miles per hour fast ball, a brand-new car, a beautiful girl friend - then I'm yours!" We are tempting Jesus to be other than he is. Jesus answers, your physical needs are not all important. "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."

Next the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. The devil says, "If you will bow down and serve me, all of this shall be yours." You have likely heard the saying, "The ends justify the means." In other words, if your goals are good, it is okay to use questionable, even evil means to get there. That is not so.

The devil was telling Jesus that he could pick up the sword, raise an army and conquer the world. Then people would have to listen to him. The thing is, there were a lot of people who were ready to pick up the sword and smite the Romans.

Jesus, however, refuses with another quote from Deuteronomy 6:13, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

There have been many times in the history of the Christian Church when great evil has been done

in God's name. In the middle ages, the so-called dark ages, church bishops were also civil rulers. I remember reading about one bishop who learned that there were some heretics living in a certain town. Heretics were those who believed differently than the church standard. Rather than trying to determine who these wrong believers were, the bishop told his men to "Kill them all. God will sort them out."

Hopefully we are less extreme than that today. Yet, church members and sometimes pastors too, continue to do unkind and hurtful things to each other. We are tempted to believe that as long as we are working to purify the church, the Lord is on our side. We might wish that Jesus were more practical and understanding, but his standard is always the same. We are to act in love toward one another always. The ends do not justify the means.

The devil comes to Jesus a third time in the wilderness. This time he takes Jesus to the Pinnacle of the temple. He tells Jesus to cast himself off, for surely God will catch him. Just think, the devil says, how swiftly the crowds will gather to see such displays of power!

The devil even quotes scripture. He quotes from Psalm 91, "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."

Jesus replies from Deut. 6:16, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Jesus did have the power to do mighty miracles. In his ministry he healed the sick, calmed the storm, even raised the dead. Yet each of these things he did out of compassion. He never did miracles just to be showy or to bring attention to himself. His miracles were always secondary to his mission.

After he healed Simon's mother-in-law later in Luke 4, Jesus went away to a deserted place to pray. In the morning the disciples came seeking him. They wanted him to come back to the house, because many more sick people were there waiting on Jesus to heal them. Jesus refused to go back saying, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." (Luke 4:43)

Jesus declared that his preaching ministry was more important than his healing ministry. With hindsight we can see that. Anyone he healed physically would still be subject to other illnesses and to physical death. So the physical healing was temporary, and his saving message was eternal.

I suspect that most of us modern Christians would like for Jesus to heal our physical problems and stop meddling in the rest of our lives. So once again we are trying to tempt Jesus to become our kind of messiah.

Every once in a while I find myself thinking that if God would come down during morning worship and do a few spectacular miracles, we would have more people here on Sunday morning. Wouldn't that be nice?

Some Christians want that so badly, they engage in dangerous behavior so that God will have to save them. The churches that handle rattlesnakes and drink poison come to mind here.

I have to admit that there are those who have handled rattlesnakes and been bitten on numerous occasions without ill effects. Then again, we also hear of people who have engaged in snake handling and died as a result of being bitten.

Jesus said, "Do not put God to the test." I'd like to say that is why you will never see me handling rattlesnakes. The truth of the matter is that snakes give me the creeps, and you won't see me handling the nonpoisonous ones either!

That being said, we are all nevertheless, tempted to force God's hand in other ways. Most of the time churches and church members are afraid to step out in faith and trust God. Still there are times when churches and individuals get so carried away with some grand idea that they forge ahead without God.

Sometimes God calls us to step out in faith and risk. Other times we need to let some good things or good ministries drop, because that is not where God is leading us.

God is not some magic genie such that, if we invoke his name, he has to come out and make our plans work.

We follow our Lord, not the other way around. So we must do the hard work of discernment, praying, Bible Study, worship until God's will is clear.

Jesus resisted the temptations of the devil in the wilderness. We are to follow his example. In addition, we are to take care that we are not ourselves, trying to tempt Jesus into being our kind of messiah. We follow Jesus, not the other way around.

Amen.