



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 10, 2019
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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. He 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.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.” ’

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.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written,
“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.” ’

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.” ’
Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Trials and Temptations – so often we lump those two words together as if they describe the same thing; but, to be clear, there is an awfully big difference between saying, “God is trying me or testing me,” and saying, “God is tempting me.” You see, God can and does test our faith, desiring that through such experiences we would become even more steadfast; that we would know better how to live as heirs of the grace of life, which is to say nothing of the trials of life in general, those situations we encounter for having lived on this side of heaven. But this we do know, and can say with great faith and assurance – God does not tempt. The Bible says quite plainly: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.”

So, why then does Jesus teach us: “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil?” Well, to begin, the nature of the evil about which Jesus speaks - the very construct of that word – it suggests that Jesus is not just talking about evil in a generic sense; but, more specifically, he is referring to the “evil one,” and so Jesus is essentially teaching us to pray for protection against Satan; to pray that God would see fit to guard us from any situation wherein Satan would prove so formidable that we would be overwhelmed by temptation.

In this morning’s New Testament Lesson, we find that Jesus himself was tempted; and it doesn’t take us long to realize that this temptation does not come from God, but from the aforementioned evil one. For this reason, we can safely say that Jesus’ time of testing in the wilderness was permitted by God, but we cannot say that God was the source of the temptations.

Now that being said, we would also do well to recognize the benefit of Jesus being faced with this time of trial and temptation. In doing so, Jesus shows us that there isn’t a single aspect of the human experience to which he cannot relate, and that includes being tested in every way as we are...and that also includes being tempted.

And goodness knows, we all have to deal with that from time to time – temptation, that is, those very real impulses to think and say and do the things which miss the mark of God’s will...those things which cause us to fall short of the glory of God! But temptation, in and of itself, is not the problem – it is yielding to temptation that ultimately proves sinful. In other words, it is not the temptation at school to look over at a neighbor’s desk and copy their work, nor is it the temptation to fudge on our taxes so that April 15th is not quite as burdensome. Temptation is not the sin but rather the mechanism by which the sin is called out from us, the way by which those things are actually enlivened in us which run contrary to the will and intention of God.

This is why Jesus can be tempted in every way as we are, and yet be without sin because, at the end of the day, while Jesus is human like all of us, he is God like none of us; so we must stop

short of saying that Jesus' temptations are exactly like ours, because they were very unique to him and striking at the core of who he was and what he came to do as the promised Messiah.

One of the first things we notice about this time of temptation in Jesus' life is that it happened in the wilderness and at a time when Jesus had been fasting, and primarily because Jesus' own life reveals the value of that spiritual discipline. Fasting has become a relatively common Lenten observance today; however, it also needs to be said that there is no biblical mandate which says that we must fast.

Sometimes people ask me if they should fast, and I usually respond the same way: If fasting helps enhance your spiritual life...if it draws you nearer to the redemptive work of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, then fast! If, however, fasting becomes something that proves unhealthy or if it somehow contributes to a sense of spiritual superiority, then don't.

For Jesus' part, consider how he fasts. He doesn't fast in the town center – he doesn't walk around with a furrowed brow so that everyone knows how painful and miserable he is. On the contrary, Jesus fasted far away from where people were - in the wilderness, the Bible tells us! Needless to say, Jesus was hungry! We know that he was hungry because turning stones into bread was for him a temptation! We read about it beginning in verse 3: "If you are the son of God," the devil says. "Command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Oh, what a temptation that must have been, especially when we consider that Jesus was probably as weak as he would ever be, save the final hours of his life.

But there's something else being tested here. Listen again to the first few words of that first temptation..."If you are the Son of God..." In other words, "If you really are who you say that you are... prove it!"

Friends, this temptation is meant to conjure up doubts in Jesus' mind about his purpose, perhaps moving him to prove in some tangible way that he was, in fact, the Son of God, but Jesus already knows this! Jesus didn't need to question the Holy Spirit that descended upon him like a dove at the time of his baptism, nor does he need to question that voice from heaven which said, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

And so, in response to this temptation, Jesus says: "It is written, 'one does not live by bread alone.'" In Matthew's account of this same story Jesus adds the following words: "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." And we know that Jesus was not diminishing the importance of food...he never denies the importance of food. In fact, in the Lord's Prayer he teaches us to pray for our daily bread. I think part of what Jesus is communicating to us here is that just as food is essential to our physical bodies, so too is God's Word essential to our spiritual bodies.

The scene quickly shifts and we find Jesus led to a high place and shown “all the kingdoms of the world.” The devil says, “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.”

Lest we forget, this was a legitimate temptation. If it were not so, it wouldn't be listed here. Think of it this way, Jesus is looking out over the world...he can see the world he loves, the world that he came to save. But Jesus knows all-too-well that to overcome the power of sin and death – to save the world – it will not be accomplished by yielding to the power of the one he came to overthrow.

The church today corporately can learn a great deal from this temptation, because we need to remember that abiding and fruitful discipleship is not simply handed to us. It really is a journey that tastes the entire human experience. It is not something that can be accomplished with one simple successful program or a well-crafted ministry initiative; a life of faith requires a life of faith. If Jesus were all about immediate gratification and temporal success, maybe he would have given into that temptation; but, as it stands, Jesus didn't sell out and take the world just because it was there for the taking. No! He would take the world, alright, but he would do so on his terms...and so he responds, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

But the devil isn't done! We are told that Jesus was then taken to the pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple: “If you are the Son of God,” the devil says, “throw yourself down from here; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” What I find particularly interesting about that exchange is that the devil also knew what the Bible said. In fact, he quoted it. William Shakespeare captures the essence of this reality in a marvelous exchange in his play *The Merchant of Venice*. Antonio says: “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose! An evil soul producing holy witness is like a villain with a smiling cheek, a godly apple rotten at the heart. And Bassanio replies: “In religion, what error but some sober brow will bless it and approve it with a text, hiding the grossness with fair ornament.” In other words, and I know this doesn't come as much of a surprise, but people can and do use the Bible for their own selfish purposes.

One of the Confessions that emerge from the Protestant Reformation is the “Westminster Confession of Faith” and it provides a wonderful insight in this regard: “When there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture, it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.” In other words, scripture interprets scripture! We would do well to note that is exactly what Jesus did! “Again it is written,” Jesus said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” For the record, Jesus here was referencing Deuteronomy 6 while the

devil had referenced Psalm 91 – and yes, Psalm 91 talks about trusting God, but Jesus points out that testing God is not the same thing as trusting God.

Of all the wonderful themes that emerge from this passage, this one stands out for me in that Jesus trusted and was committed to God. It makes me wonder what we would have done. For example, we may not have had any trouble helping ourselves to just one tiny piece of bread; and we may have trusted in our ability to wield some measure of influence over the world. Why, we may have even delighted in the possibility of jumping from the temple heights and having God’s angels raise us up on eagle’s wings, but not Jesus!

That classic Lenten hymn which served as our processional puts it like this: “As thou with Satan didst contend, and didst the victory win, O give us strength in Thee to fight, in Thee to conquer sin.” To better understand the nature of Jesus’ temptations, and how it relates to us, could there be a better commentary than that of God’s Word?

Hear now these verses from Hebrews chapter 2 and 4: “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find help in time of need.”

Let us pray:

Gracious and Loving God, by your gracious mercy, and throughout the season of Lent, help us to be open to the promptings of your Holy Spirit, that it would not only convict us of our sins, but lead us far beyond the limits of our current understanding but not into temptation. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*