

First Sunday of Lent – March 6, 2022

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where 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. ³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And 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. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

⁹Then 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, ¹⁰for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

¹¹and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

I’m livin’ for givin’ the devil his due.

With apologies to Blue Oyster Cult for cribbing a famous line from one of their biggest hits, this probably isn’t what you expect to hear from a preacher on the first Sunday in Lent. If ever.

But let's give credit where credit is due: the devil knows his stuff. He knows Jesus is the Son of God and he knows his Scripture.

That much is evident when Luke recounts this encounter in the Judean wilderness.

Many scholars and a few English translations of this Gospel will prefer the wording “*Since* you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread” and “*Since* you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.”

There's not so much iffy ambiguity in the Greek. Jesus' adversary has no qualms about conceding this point. This is not a test of Jesus proving he is who he is.

It is a test of *how* he will be who is.

Will he be obedient to the Spirit of God that placed him where he is for a purpose? Or will he cut corners, take advantage of the shortcuts made available to him and play by

an easier set of rules? Will he fall into the same traps many have before him or will he forge a new path?

There is a parallel between Jesus as the new Adam and the old man's response to very similar bait. Hungry? Just take a bite. It's easy for you.

Get 'em while they're ripe for the picking. OK, that might be the tempter's suggested approach ... to the forbidden fruit. But it's also part of a time-tested strategy. Adam in Genesis had just been made and placed in the Garden and met Eve and I suspect was a bit overwhelmed and overstimulated when offered a bite.

Jesus had just been baptized, claimed with love and praise from God's voice in the heavens and whisked away like a whirlwind into the desert for one hell of a fast. I don't recommend fasting 40 hours in a climate-controlled environment. This is don't-try-this-at-home material for sure. I last about 4 hours between meals sometimes before

“hangry” sets in and I’m not making good choices or saying anything profound. My experience tells me the devil had a solid sense of timing.

But famished though he may have been, Jesus has the sense to take a defiant stance. One does not live by bread alone, Jesus says, quoting Deuteronomy which continues: “But by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” His is a political statement, setting his position far apart from the Roman emperors who claimed to be sons of God. They had access to a vast set of resources empire-wide. A little tax here, a little military persuasion there, the world leaders of Jesus’ time would not bat an eye at doing whatever they had in their power to do whatever they wanted to do.

And I am sure Jesus wanted to eat. He had a human body, every input of which would have told him to take what he could get. But he needed to demonstrate that a human life is more significant, carries more meaning than a series of 20

or 30 thousand-some days of responding to cravings and biological impulses. We are body and we are spirit and the latter requires a sustenance we can't do without.

Turn one stone into bread and one Son of God eats for a day. Turn billions of eyes toward care for all other human beings as the children of God and the whole world eats for a lifetime. That is the potential impact of living with a staple diet of God's Word of abundance and concern for our neighbors.

But as Adam wasn't hungry just for a quick nosh, he could be tempted to sink his teeth into the power of being like God, as the serpent promised. If Jesus came to fix the world, why not take the offer presented to him to rule all the kingdoms of the world? Seems a lot simpler to roll the eyes, give a sarcastic "Sure, I'll worship *you*" and get about doing what needs to be done. A lot simpler, anyway, than giving us parables about fish and wedding banquets and

mighty mustard shrubs by which to compare it and try for a couple thousand years to understand and help bring to fruition.

But being led up and offered power *over* is not Jesus' approach to being Son of God or King of Kings. Emperors had and have ruled over impressive chunks of the world's lands. For a few centuries here and there. But that kind of power always takes compromise, figurative deals with the devil if not literal. Concessions to violence, to rigid hierarchy, to maintaining a permanent underclass. Jesus would have none of it. He turned again to Deuteronomy and its commands to serve and worship only God. And for Christ's sake that would mean power exercised from the bottom up, from coming alongside the poor, the outcast, the permanent underclass and declaring it not permanent. And sometimes to our frustration, but ultimately to our joy and relief, a commitment on his end to this kind of power temporal

leaders often scoff at, for as long as it takes to overturn that tired old order. A commitment not to let any end justify such revolting means.

Finally, the devil catches on, I'll give him that. And he responds to Jesus' insistence on quoting Scripture with his own quote. And it's not wrong. He quotes Psalm 91, verses 11 and 12, without twisting their words. In doing so, he challenges the Son of God, to do what any child does: test their boundaries.

Wanna keep up that whole solidarity-with-the-human-race thing? Emmanuel, God with us? It says in God's Word you can find out right now just how tight God is with you, the devil suggests.

Jesus turns to Deuteronomy again and references a time when God's people did question whether God was in their midst and demanded proof. He brings it back full circle because this command comes after the thirsty masses

demand water. Moses gets it for them by petitioning God, who permits him to draw water from the rock so they won't stone him to death.

And so for a little while they are satisfied.

A rock. It can be bread, the devil says. It can be water, God says, if you need it to be. It can be a weapon, people say... and do. Same item. Multiple possibilities.

In this series of temptations, Jesus demonstrates who he will be as the Son of God. Patient, with a heart for God's Word, not just a mind to memorize it or a tongue to utilize it as a weapon. The devil has those. Christ is compassionate, considerate and consistent. He wouldn't go any other way.

We get this example set before us because as we wander in the wilderness of the weird, wild, wicked world we live in, the temptation comes to each of us as well.

The question isn't so much if you are a child of God.

But since you are a child of God, what kind of child of God will you and I be?

The devil is due an answer.

I say beloved. Forgiven. Full of grace. And only by way of these God-given attributes: at God's service, attentive to God's Word.

How we will live this out Christ frees us to work out.

The devil is in the details.

Amen.