

“Lenten Power Plays”
(sermon given 2/28/10 by Scott Jansen)
Luke 4:1-13

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[Prayer for Illumination] Our glorious Lord, we bow before your throne to hear your word. Help us to step away from the distractions—the things of this world that are so noisy—that we may have ears that hear, through Jesus Christ our Lord..... Amen.

When Jesus was baptized, he was publicly affirmed as God’s beloved Son, so life was pretty good for him. But right after being baptized, he ran into a snag—temptations, or a “test” from God, according to Luke. Listen now for God's word for you.

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. Amen.

So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

This story confronts us with all kinds of challenging questions. For example, why is God's Holy Spirit... leading Jesus into the hands of the devil? Isn't the devil the enemy???? Or why does God have some need to waste forty days on testing Jesus? Doesn't God know that Jesus will pass the test???? Or why does the devil say that all authority over all the nations of the world has been given over to me—and Jesus seems to accept that assessment. Why would God deliberately choose to hand over all authority over the world to the devil?

I could go on. If this were the passage that the confirmation kids were working on, I'd be in real trouble trying to answer all these questions. But, fortunately for me, I'm not dialoguing with anyone today, so I can just ignore all the impossible conundrums in this passage and shift our focus entirely.....

So let's try this. What if this story, a story written by Luke some forty years after Jesus died, what if the story tells us more about Luke's world than it does about Jesus's world? What if the reason Luke writes this story is because this story really resonated with Luke's congregation? What, then, would this story mean to the first people who ever read it????

Well, there are three temptations here. And the simplest answer is that Luke's congregation must have faced those same three temptations. So let's try that idea out and see if it fits.

My guess is that, forty years after Jesus died, many of the early disciples were wondering if God had abandoned them into the hands of the devil. They all expected the world to end—within their lifetimes. But when the Jews revolted against the Romans and they pushed the Romans out of Jerusalem for a short time, and everyone's hopes were raised..., it must have been a crushing blow when the Romans re-grouped, sent in their big armies and burned down Jerusalem, along with its splendid temple, completely to the ground.... Luke wrote this story shortly after the destruction of the temple.

It was a time when the disciples would naturally ask themselves, where is God? Did something go wrong? Is this what God had planned????? And we can relate, can't we? We have asked those same questions on occasion, haven't we?

So imagine that your beloved relative is diagnosed with a terminal disease and you pray for healing, but nothing changes. Or that you've been praying for a job for years but none has materialized. Or that you've been praying for your friend to give up drug abuse, but nothing changes. How long? How long do you pray before you start to lose hope? How long do you pray before you start to wonder if God has abandoned you, and maybe the devil is calling the shots????

The BIG temptation for Luke's congregation, after the Romans squashed the Jewish rebellion, was to lose hope, and to assume that God had abandoned them. But let's break down that temptation into its components and see what we come up with.

Why was the Roman occupation and the destruction of Jerusalem a problem? What kinds of stresses did it put on Luke's congregation???

Well, the first stress would be for daily bread. After they had invested everything in their rebellion, and after that was crushed without mercy, there was mass starvation. As with all wars, the people who die by hunger or by disease far outnumber those who die by direct violence on the battlefield. So, the first temptation was to say to God, "Oh God, if you really are God, turn this stone into a loaf of bread.... We're hungry! You did it for the Hebrews back when Moses needed some manna. Why not do it for us? Where are you God?"???????

I think something of Luke's own personal struggle with doubt is reflected in the question repeated three times in the story—If you really are the Son of God..... Can't you just imagine a worship service of Christ's disciples forty years after he died—that someone might ask the question, "if he really was the Son of God, then why are so many of us starving to death?"???

Now, what would this story mean to those parishioners? First—it would mean that Jesus had been there. Jesus also knew hunger. Their hunger was not being thrust upon them by a God who did not care, or who did not know what it was like to be hungry. Jesus was famished, yet he answered the devil, you don't live by bread alone. Life has other priorities beyond food. There are more important things to cling to, even if you don't have food. I suspect that message was both a comfort and a challenge to the early disciples.....

But it also can be a comfort and a challenge for us. Should the power of God be used to give us some kind of a boost in the material

world? Should we pray for a good parking spot right in front of the church at 9:59 a.m.? Should we be angry at God if our material needs are not met? Or....., if our bodies are hurting for some reason, perhaps we should remember that Jesus knows what that is like..., and also that there are more important things to consider.....

The second temptation comes with a premise, namely, that the authority to rule over all the nations of the world has been handed over to the devil. Once upon a time, it was not the devil's, but now it has been given to the devil. Hmmmm.... Let's set aside the philosophical questions there, and ask instead, how would Luke's congregation feel about that? Having been conquered by Rome, having had their rebellion crushed, wouldn't it seem to them that the devil was the acting ruler of the world?

And what was their temptation within that situation? The easiest thing to do would be to march down to the Roman centurion's office and sign up to be a tax collector. The shrewdest businessmen among the Jews would cooperate with the Romans, to aid them in their efforts at oppressing the Jews. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em....

I hear a little of Luke's own temptation in the story when the devil says to Jesus, I will give you all the authority, if you will only worship me. In Luke's society the temptation said, you can be an honored tax collector, if you will only renounce your God.....

And don't we also face that temptation? When it comes to business, or politics, isn't it a temptation to set aside Christian principles and values and to adopt the values of the world? If you look at who really has power in business or politics, it's hard to stop yourself from thinking, maybe I should just copy whatever works so well for them....

Jesus didn't dispute that the devil was the one who pulled the strings on the world's stage. He just answered, "worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

So Luke's parishioners said, sure we could get ahead in politics or business, but to do that, we'd have to give up our fidelity to our Lord. And that's often true today.... Do you want to be the most successful person in your career? Or..... do you want to be committed to serving only God? Usually, we have to choose one or the other.....

The last temptation was to put popularity ahead of God. The fact that Jesus was standing on the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem was something that all the first readers of this story would

understand—Jesus was standing in the middle of the biggest crowd in the land. What should he do with such a gigantic audience???

Fling yourself down and let the angels catch you, suggests the devil. Wow! Wouldn't that be a sight! Who wouldn't want to hang out with the guy who could pull off a stunt like that?

Luke's church also had temptations to choose popularity ahead of God. Should they promise miraculous health and wealth to anyone who converted to Christianity? Maybe they should do a few flashy miracles of healing out in the marketplace and try to get some converts that way, instead of having to love people into the church, one person at a time. Real evangelism is so much work. Why not just use a miraculous shortcut?

The church has always struggled with this temptation. Ten years ago, I read an article from a church growth magazine saying the way to grow your church is to invite good-looking men to watch a football game at your home, and to serve them lots and lots of free beer during the game. Seriously, this is what it said. They had to be good-looking because that's what ultimately attracted the women. So, the strategy was to get these guys good and drunk on all your free beer and then to convince them to come to worship the following Sunday as a kind of pre-party party. Kind of like Christian tailgating. And when they sober up and start asking questions, you just tell them that they have to come to worship next week to find out where the next football and beer party is being held right after worship.....

Well, you may think that's questionable, but my wife recently read how the church growth folks today are now using cage matches to attract young people to the church. Yeah. Come to church and watch two guys get locked into a cage and beat each other up..., in the name of Jesus, of course.... Mary read that one. I didn't read it—I've given up on church growth magazines.

It's easy to be a popular growing church. It's easy to be popular in general. All you have to do is put popularity ahead of God. Make popularity itself your idolatrous goal..... Why shouldn't Jesus throw himself down and let the angels catch him, and instantly become the most popular guy in all of Israel???

Jesus answered, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." In other words, do not toy with God and with God's power just to satisfy your own amusement.

I remember doing exactly that when I first became a Christian. I was in awe of God's power as I read through the Bible, awed with the

idea that God could just change things, and that Christians could pray, and God promised to do whatever we asked in Christ's name. So, I gathered a few friends and I said, I can make that chair rise up off the ground. And I prayed and I prayed and I asked God to lift up the chair, always in Jesus' name, of course.... As I said, this was when I first became a Christian, when I still had a whole lot to learn. Fortunately for me, God forgave me for putting God to the test. Not that God ever moved that chair. No. But after I learned the lesson of not putting God to the test, I did receive a strong sense that God had forgiven my former foolishness....

So, what do these three temptations all have in common? They are all ways of putting our own idolatrous needs for personal power... ahead of doing God's will. Whether we are looking to feed a hungry body, while ignoring our more spiritual needs, or whether we are cooperating with the ways of the world instead of abiding by God's values, or whether we are pulling flashy stunts to become popular instead of focusing on what God wants..., these are all temptations to accumulate power for ourselves... at God's expense....

That's the way temptation always works. The task that we undertake during these forty days of Lent is to ask ourselves..., to really search ourselves..., where have we succumbed to temptation?
Amen.