

March 6, 2022
Luke 4:1-13

Lent 1
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Time of Trial”

“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.”

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

Most of us cannot remember when we first learned the words of the Lord’s Prayer. It may have been at home with our parents as they faithfully fulfilled their baptismal promises to teach us the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. It may have been a Sunday school teacher, or a pastor, or a member of our family. But whenever it was that we learned the words of this prayer, it remains at the center of our prayer lives both when we pray in private and when we pray together as God’s people. We pray the Lord’s Prayer in Sunday worship as well as every other worship service in our congregations. We pray the Lord’s Prayer at the conclusion of all meetings and classes here at Zion, and I pray the Lord’s Prayer with people I visit to share the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Prayer has been the central prayer for Christians since Jesus first taught it to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount, a prayer he gave his disciples in response to their request “*Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.*” (Luke 11:1).

As familiar and beloved as the Lord’s Prayer has been for Christians throughout the generations, there is one part of the prayer that I have always found disturbing: “*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*” As a child, I had this image of God enticing me with candy and cookies as I made my way to the dinner table or tempting me to stay home and watch cartoons rather than attend Sunday worship or play with my friends rather than do my chores. It was a strange and confusing image that did not seem to match everything else I had learned about God’s love for me. Why would God want to lead me into temptation, with the possibility that I might be led astray, following a path that leads me away from the God who during Lent calls us to “*return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*” (Joel 2:13)?

Martin Luther addresses this issue that has perplexed generations of Christians in his *Small Catechism*, where once again he asks us “*what does this mean?*”

- “It is true that God tempts no one, but we ask in this prayer that God would preserve and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins, and that, although we may be attacked by them, we may finally prevail and gain the victory.”

Luther points us to the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, which occurs before the Sermon on the Mount and the teaching of this prayer, to remind us that the one who includes this petition in his prayer endured his own ordeal with temptation. The temptation of Jesus happens immediately following his baptism; Luke reports that *“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 4:1-2). The period of forty days evokes Israel’s forty years of testing in the wilderness before they entered the promised land (*“Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.”* – Deuteronomy 8:2). Being committed to the way of God in the world would not exempt Jesus or any of his followers from times of trial, nor did the presence of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ life mean an absence of struggle; *“rather, the Spirit was the available power of God in the contest.”* (Fred Craddock). The work of the Spirit will require faithfulness on the part of Jesus; neither compromise with Satan nor concessions to popular demands could be allowed. The temptations that Jesus will endure in the wilderness into which the Holy Spirit leads him are an indication of his strength, not a sign of weakness; we are not tempted to do what we cannot do but what is within our power; *“the greater the strength, the greater the temptation.”* (Craddock).

Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness are a period of fasting; *“he ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.”* (4:2). It is at the moment of great vulnerability that the devil appears and issues his first challenge: *“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread”* (4:3). Jesus is challenged to repeat the sign of God’s provision for the people of Israel in the wilderness, the manna from heaven that fed them when no other food was available (*“It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.”* – Exodus 16:15); but if Jesus makes bread for himself, he abuses his sonship by serving his own needs rather than depending on God’s provision for his needs. As the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus could have easily turned a stone into bread; but Jesus resists the devil’s temptation by quoting Scripture: *“Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.”’”* (4:4). Jesus quotes the words of Moses to the people of Israel in

Deuteronomy, which taught them that “*one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*” (Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus resists the devil’s temptation through the power of God’s Word and his faith that God will provide, that God will “*give us this day our daily bread,*” which means “*everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies*” (*Small Catechism*).

- “Jesus quotes the Torah to assert that humans are not solely responsible for their own well-being. Humans should lean into the Spirit’s leading – even in uncertain times. They should learn from the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness for forty years. During those uncertain times, their lack did not hinder God’s provision. Not knowing what came next unlocked God’s ‘what is this?’ (Manna, Exodus 16) that nourished them for forty years. The Spirit, like the pillar of cloud and fire, leads to God’s uncommon provision. This aligns with what Jesus would say later in Luke 12:15 that ‘life is more than an abundance of possessions.’ Jesus’ power was rooted in confidently following the Spirit into the unknown.” – Jeremy L. Williams.

Jesus resists the devil’s first temptation, but the Evil One is far from finished in his quest to tempt Jesus away from his God-given mission. The second temptation centers on tempting our Lord to gain power by compromise. The devil offers Jesus a Faustian deal: “*If you, then, will worship me, [all the kingdoms of the world] will all be yours*” (4:7). The desire for power is a temptation that leads many people astray; but Jesus calls the devil’s bluff (since the devil has undoubtedly exaggerated his power over the kingdoms of the world) by again quoting Scripture: “*Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’*” (4:8). Jesus again turns to Deuteronomy and its teaching to the people of Israel that “*the LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear*” (Deuteronomy 6:13). The faith of Israel is rooted in the *shema*, the confession of faith that calls upon the people to “*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The authority of God, exercised by Jesus, is superior to the authority of the devil and anyone else that seeks to draw us away from God. Jesus resists and renounces such temptations, as we at Holy Baptism renounce “*the devil and all the forces that defy God ... the powers of this world that rebel against God ... [and] the ways of sin that draw you from God*” (ELW Holy Baptism). “*Jesus rejects the Diabolic One’s offer, because the Diabolic One has miscalculated his power and does not recognize that there is no price on Jesus’ loyalty.*” (Williams).

The devil tries a third time to tempt Jesus away from fulfilling the Will of God: *“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’* (4:9). This time, the devil tries to use the power of Scripture as a weapon to succeed in his temptation, quoting from the Psalms that *“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.’”* (4:10-11; Psalm 91:11-12). But Jesus is not fooled by the devil’s deception; his response *“insinuates that the Scriptures should not be used to cast doubt on God’s presence with God’s people”* (Williams). In once again quoting from Deuteronomy, Jesus shows how the Word of God is a reminder of God’s power presence in the most difficult of times, even in the wilderness; *“Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.””* (4:12; Deuteronomy 6:16). Jesus defeats the devil’s three temptations through the power of the Word of God, so that *“when the devil has finished every test, he departed from him ...”* (4:13).

The temptations of Jesus serves many important functions in the Gospel of Luke: they clarify the nature of Jesus’ work as Son of God; identify Jesus with the heritage of Israel and the wilderness ordeal of God’s people; mirror the conflict of God reign with the reign of Satan; emphasize that Jesus’ ministry should be understood as the fulfillment of Scripture; and offer Jesus’ followers a model for resisting temptation. The Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the temptation in the wilderness so that not only will he overcome temptation but give his followers an example by which they may also resist the inevitable temptations that they will experience, the work of the devil that seeks to draw them away from God and any diabolical force that seeks allegiance that belongs to God alone. In Luke Jesus is frequently portrayed as exemplifying characteristically Christian virtues; in the temptation scene, faithfully resists temptation by relying on Scripture and refusing to put God to the test. The verses from Deuteronomy with which Jesus wards off temptation are each applicable to all people who seek to faithfully follow our Lord and resist the temptations of Satan:

- “Taken together, they declare that we are to make life more than just the pursuit of our physical needs; we are to worship and serve God alone, and it is not for us to test God ... the supreme purpose of all life is the worship of God.”
– Alan Culpepper.

The Holy Spirit leads Jesus into temptation so that the Lord might resist anything that would draw him away from his path that will be fulfilled in his death and resurrection at Jerusalem. This is not the last time our Lord will be tempted; Luke warns us at the

end of our Gospel lesson that the devil departed from him “*until an opportune time*” (4:13), which foreshadows Satan’s return later in the Gospel in the voices from the crowd that taunted Jesus as he suffered and died on the Cross:

- “And the people stood by watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’” – 23:35-38.

Jesus could have easily come down from the cross and chosen to live a different life that did not include crucifixion; but that would have meant that he would not fulfill God’s will that through his death and resurrection he “*purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.*” (*Small Catechism*). The “last temptation of Christ” is to save himself from death on the Cross; but this is a temptation that Jesus had resisted in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed “*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done*” (22:42). Because our Lord resists all temptations that were thrown at him, all who have been baptized into his death and resurrection know that we may “*belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.*” (*Small Catechism*).

- “Faced with pressing decisions regarding his identity and vocation, Jesus allowed himself to be led by the Spirit. In the experience of wrestling with the temptations, Jesus responded to the Scripture’s admonitions regarding God’s purpose for life and the call to worship and serve God. In the specific situations that would follow he would have to work out the shape of his obedience to the admonitions ... to faithfulness to the call and purposes of God.” – Culpepper.

In overcoming the temptations of the devil, Jesus gives us a model for how we can resist whatever temptations we might encounter as we follow our Lord in the path of discipleship. The letter to the Hebrews teaches us that “*we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have 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 grace to help in time of need*” (Hebrews 4:15-16). As the devil waiting for an “opportune time”

when he might succeed in tempting Jesus away from obeying the Will of God, we may find ourselves vulnerable to such an “opportune time” when we might be overcome by the enticements of the Evil One:

- “The devil awaits that opportune time with us, that time when he can appeal to our injured pride, our wounded ego, our fear of not being appreciated, our anger at being ignored. These are those opportune times when the devil’s persistence reaps great benefits.” – Peter Gomes.

God does not lead us into temptation to cause us to lose our faith and find ourselves in perilous circumstances; but following Jesus as his disciples will cause us to encounter the same trials and temptations that Jesus faced throughout his life. In another translation of Jesus’ prayer, we pray that God might “*save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.*” We pray that God gives us the strength to overcome the devil’s intentions, that “*our Father in heaven may deliver us from all kinds of evil ... and at last, when our final hour comes, may grant us a blessed end and take us by grace from this valley of tears to himself in heaven.*” (*Small Catechism*). As Jesus’ life was filled with trials and temptations, we can be assured that our lives as Christians will face similar ordeals and encounters with evil. But as the great hymn of faith assures us, if we have “*trials and temptations, is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged – take it to the Lord in prayer!*” (ELW Hymn 742).

- “So you see that no one is free from trials. However, we can defend ourselves against them and check them by entreating God’s help in prayer ... we cannot prevent trials and temptations from overtaking us, but with our prayer and our invocation of God’s assistance, we can stave off their victory over us.” – Martin Luther, “Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer”

I do not believe that God is actively trying to tempt us away from being faithful followers of our Lord and Saviour; but I know that our lives as disciples of Christ are filled with the same struggles with forces that seek to draw us away from God’s loving presence and God’s Will for us as the Church of Jesus Christ. We will always face temptations and times of trial, but we can resist them by following our Lord’s example of turning to the Word of God that is “*a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path*” (Psalm 119:105), the powerful presence of God that will lead us and guide us so that we may follow our Lord in the confidence that “*if you lead me I cannot stray.*” (ELW Hymn 768).

- “Lord, give us grace to hold to you when all is weariness and fear and sin abounds within, without; when love is tested by the doubt . . . that love is false, or dead within the soul, when every act brings new confusion, new distress, new opportunities, new misunderstandings, and every thought new accusation. Lord, give us grace that we may know that in the darkness pressing round it is the mist of sin that hides your face, that you are there and you do know we love you still and our dependence and endurance in your will is still our gift of love.” – Gilbert Shaw

In the presence of God and the power of God’s Word, we can overcome all temptation so that we might follow our Lord toward the new life that is God’s blessed hope for all who follow him.

Amen.