

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Luke 4:1-13, “Even in the Desert”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/6/2022**

This season of Lent is one that we come to  
as a figurative time in the desert.

We practice what it would be like  
if we were without food, without comforts,  
without the easy way through life.

But as we come to grips with Covid as an enduring feature of life,  
as our stomachs turn with each development in the Russian war  
upon Ukraine,  
as the world turns a blind eye toward the genocide of  
Uighurs in China,  
as the realities of climate change and our own social/political issues  
confront us each morning,  
it would be fair to wonder: are we already in the desert?

Do we already live day by day in the difficult circumstances that Lent  
is supposed to prepare us for?  
What is the function Lent’s metaphorical desert  
if you’re already thirsty and dried out by the real world?

Will the practice of Lent help us get out of the desert of our ordinary lives?

Rev. Larissa Kwong Abazia writes,  
“What if it isn’t about getting out of the desert?  
What if we are called to dwell in our doubts, fears, anxieties,  
and brokenness?

What if we are meant to stand in solidarity with those trapped  
in their own wilderness experiences?  
I wonder if we can imagine making a home right here,  
a place existing in the tension between  
desolation and burgeoning possibility.

In the desert, we cast aside the temptations of this world  
and actively engage in the promise that abundant love  
will always have the final say.  
The desert may very well be right where we belong.”

Today we consider the inner life of Jesus in the desert.

God will supply us with what is needed to live well?

The first verse of Luke chapter four starts us on an uncertain path:

**“Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness  
to be tempted by the devil.”**

I suppose the reassuring thing about this is that the Spirit of God  
remains with Jesus in the desert.

But the verse also has a clearly disturbing element—  
the leading of God’s Spirit is into a time of temptation.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer which Jesus  
taught his disciples, we say,

“lead us *not* into temptation.”

Could it be that God *does* lead us into temptation? We’ll come back to that.

#### **4.3-4 Tempting our weaknesses (aka, the stomach test)**

The first temptation is the stomach test in verses 3 to 4.

In this first temptation, it says that the tempter or the devil  
came to Jesus and spoke to him.

No description is given to this character,  
it doesn’t say that Jesus saw the tempter.

It’s entirely possible that these thoughts came to Jesus  
in very much the same way that temptations come to us—  
as he goes about his own business.

Jesus has been fasting for 40 days. He’s pretty hungry.

So the first thing the tempter puts in Jesus mind is,

“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

Jesus was weak. Just like you and me, Jesus was weak. Did you know that?

Jesus was a human being who had the weakness of getting hungry.

This temptation recognizes that weakness  
and goes straight to the gut.

Now, there's nothing wrong with a miracle of turning a stone into bread.  
There's certainly nothing wrong with feeding a hungry person.  
So we shouldn't think that the outward thing  
is the temptation here.

Rather, the temptation is to use his God given identity  
to satisfy himself and in so-doing minimize  
his connection with humanity.

If Jesus isn't fully human, if he skirts the experience of the incarnation,  
how can he be our representative in life ... an in death?

Where God cultivates an identity in Jesus,  
the tempter tries to twist that into something  
that would jeopardize his mission.

But Jesus does not give in to his weakness.

And Jesus does not give into doubting whether he is the Son of God.

Instead, he comes back at the tempter with the word of God from  
Deuteronomy chapter 8,

**“It is written: ‘People do not live on bread alone,  
but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”**

In this way, Jesus demonstrates that even in the desert,  
the Spirit of God offers life that is full to the brim.

What is a weakness that you feel vulnerable to in life?  
How might God's Spirit meet you in that weakness  
and offer a new kind of sustenance?

#### **4.5-8 Tempting our passions (the easy victory test)**

So the first temptation for Jesus to doubt his identity  
came in the stomach test, focusing on Jesus' weakness.

The second temptation I call “the easy victory” test.

This focuses on Jesus' vocation, his passion, his sense of mission.

In verse 9 the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain  
and shows him all the kingdoms of the world.

And the dark prince of this world says to the Son of God,  
**“If you worship me, it will all be yours.”**

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

This is the land of infomercials. They depict people struggling to perform basic tasks like ... baking chicken, going for a walk or pulling weeds.

“Why work so hard?” infomercial world asks?

Just take the easy way with our amazing new product!

It will solve all your problems and more –

plus, if you act now, we’ll give you more solutions  
to problems you didn’t even know you had!

More than anything, Jesus wants to carry out the Father’s mission  
to win the world bring it into line with the Kingdom of God.

Take the easy way, Jesus!

Victory could be yours at the low-low price  
of worshipping the tempter!

But there is no easy victory here.

And this very same temptation to take the easy victory  
to achieving the church’s mission is alive and well today.

If we fall into the idea that there is an easy technique to be a  
successful and vibrant church, we’re getting scammed.

If life in the desert is an enduring reality for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,  
we need to let go of quick-fix mentality.

For the work we are undertaking, there are no quick fixes.

#### **4.9-12 Tempting our strengths (the spectacle test)**

The first temptation was the stomach test,

the second temptation was the easy victory test.

The third temptation is the spectacle test.

In verse 9, the second temptation begins in the same way as the first,  
“If you *are* the Son of God.”

The basic temptation to doubt his identity remains the same.  
Since tempting Jesus at his point of weakness didn't work out,  
the devil now moves on to the place of Jesus' strength—  
things pertaining to his relationship with his Father.

He takes him to the temple and this time, the tempter actually uses  
Scripture as part of his temptation. He says,  
“Look, throw yourself down because the Bible says in Psalm 91  
that God will command his angels to lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

Since Jesus responded to the devil's first two temptations using scripture,  
now the devil is using scripture back against Jesus,  
hoping that Jesus will presume upon his own strengths  
and fall into the trap  
of making a tremendous spectacle before others  
at the temple in Jerusalem.

Yes ... as many of us know from our own experience,  
even the Bible recognizes that the Bible can be used  
for both holy and unholy purposes.

As before, I think the same is true for us.  
If we don't give in at our place of weakness, or to quick-fixes,  
then we can expect to be tempted in the places  
that we consider ourselves to be strong.  
Because that's where we *think* we're less vulnerable.  
We don't see it coming.

Jesus responds by saying,  
**“It is also written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”**

What Jesus reveals here is that he knows  
how to interpret Scripture correctly.

Yes, Psalm 91 says we can expect and pray for God's gracious protection,  
but that doesn't mean we are to manipulate God  
by requiring proof through jumping off of buildings.

And think about this: Even if Jesus did turn a stone into bread  
or jump off a building to be saved by angels,  
nothing would be gained beyond what Jesus  
already knew about himself in his baptism—  
he *really is* the Son of God.

If we are cultivating life that is full to the brim even in the desert,  
then we must let go of needing God to show us miraculous proof.

**Verse 13 – the devil leaves**

After Jesus had been tempted,  
the last verse says the devil left him until an opportune time.

I take this to mean that throughout Jesus' ministry,  
these same kinds of temptations continued to take place,  
but in the more mundane, ordinary, circumstances of life  
that we would be familiar with.

At the beginning of the sermon I posed the question:  
Does God lead us into temptation?  
The answer is no in that a temptation  
is something of the Devil that seeks to bring us down.

But the answer is yes in that God allows us to be tested  
so that we can rely on our baptismal identity and the word of God.

[PAUSE]

So what are *we* supposed to do?

Just because we see Jesus using scripture  
and remembering the name that God gave him in baptism  
doesn't mean that's going to be easy for me to do.  
How am I supposed to do that?

To begin with, we can look at Jesus' response to the tempter and say—  
that's what God sees in me, too.  
God calls me a beloved child, too.

I believe the practice of Lent is helpful even when the world is like a desert  
because remembering what we're called to,  
letting go of quick-fix approaches,  
and rejecting the appeal of spectacle and glory  
are things that make us more resilient.

Lent doesn't have to *add* to our sense of being deprived,  
it can teach us how to do a lot with a little.

This year, we are seeking a Lent that is "full to the brim"  
with God's Spirit.

If your world is dry, Lent is an invitation over 40 days  
to walk with Jesus in search of  
living water within your soul:  
the Spirit of the Living God who will never leave you in time of need.