

Luke 4:1-13
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth 10/03/2019
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Grace and peace to you from Father God, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit. '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... When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.' Let's pray:

Jesus overcame the temptations in the wilderness. He made it possible for us to overcome our temptations. Be like Jesus and just say no. Amen.

Sound familiar? Is that how you think about today's gospel (Luke 4:1-13)? Most of us know the just-say-no story or some variation of it. Maybe it's what you were taught or have come to believe. It's often an underlying theme in Lent, and it's probably the most common approach for dealing with temptation. Just-say-no and if you can't, then try harder.

Just-say-no. Is it really that simple? Is that all there is to this story? You've probably learnt by now that if I'm asking those questions, I believe there's a lot more Jesus wants us to learn from his temptation in the wilderness. It certainly hasn't influenced my life that way. I don't think it was that straightforward for Jesus' either. And I suspect you're beginning to churn it over in your mind too.

Our lives and our faith are more than the sum of our choices, and our temptations are rarely a simple choice between this or that. So I want to push the boundaries and consider a different way of thinking about temptation.

- What if temptation is more than a yes or no question to be answered?
- What if temptations are not a pop quiz from God testing our love and devotion?
- What if temptations are more about our learning than God's score keeping?
- What if our response to temptation is more about diagnosing our lives than fearing judgement?
- What if temptation is necessary for our salvation, wholeness, and restoration?
- What if struggling with temptation is a steep learning curve, necessary to comprehend what it really means to be about God's business?
- What if, brace yourselves, what if temptations are the disguises for the good the devil unwittingly supports?

Have you ever considered temptation from these perspectives? I know that's not the usual perspective but it offers a different way of engaging life and our faith. It tells a very different story about temptation than the just-say-no story, without changing nor distorting the story of Jesus in the wilderness. It *is* the story of Jesus in the wilderness.

Things become clearer when we see what comes before and after today's gospel. It's preceded by Jesus' baptism and followed by Jesus' ministry in Galilee and his teaching in the Nazareth synagogue. I want you to consider temptation, Jesus' and our own, in light of that pattern; baptism, wilderness, public life and ministry.

Jesus went to the wilderness immediately after his baptism (Luke 3:21-22). At his baptism, the heaven opened, the Spirit descended, and the Father declared, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The Father claimed and identified Jesus as his own, just as he does at each of our baptisms.

After his baptism, Jesus entered the wilderness with the Father's words echoing in his ears. His identity and relationship with the Father were already established, even before he faced the first temptation. Whether Jesus said yes or no did not determine his sonship, his belovedness, or that God was well pleased. That was already a given. Jesus could neither earn them nor lose them, and neither can we. Grace always precedes temptation, just as forgiveness always precedes repentance.

The temptations and struggles in the desert, did not determine how God would see Jesus but how Jesus would see himself. "If you are the Son of God," began the devil's temptation. It was less a yes or no question about proving himself and more a question of Jesus discovering and knowing more about himself.

In struggling with his temptations Jesus began to know himself to be filled with and led by the Spirit. The truth of his baptism and the truth of his Father's words were confirmed through his temptations in the wilderness. The truth no longer echoed in his ears; it spoke from the depth of his being.

The temptations confirmed Jesus' baptismal identity and it was that identity by which Jesus overcame the temptations. The devil failed but inadvertently "did good." The devil had unwittingly tempted Jesus into knowing and experiencing the truth about himself; his sonship, his belovedness, and his Father's pleasure. Jesus' identity and relationship with the Father were no longer only words spoken from heaven but a truth and reality experienced in the wilderness. Jesus would speak this truth to the people of Nazareth.

After his time in the wilderness, Jesus went to the synagogue in his hometown Nazareth, and read to the people from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," and finished by telling

them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:14-21). This is Jesus’ proclamation of self-understanding and it was formed by the temptations and his wilderness experience. He is telling the people of Nazareth who he is and what he is about. A few weeks ago I called this the politics of Jesus, his identity and mission, the direction and work of his life. Temptations teach us that about ourselves.

Our temptations, struggles, and wilderness experiences offer an opportunity to become more fully ourselves. That’s what they did for Jesus and it’s what they can do for us. They shape our identity as children of God by guiding us to the realisation that we are broken and desperately in need of salvation. The desert monks certainly saw it this way. St Antony the Great, sometimes called the father of monasticism, goes as far as saying, “Without temptation no one can be saved” (Sayings of St Antony of Egypt: 5).

We misunderstand when we focus on the thing or situation that is tempting us. Our temptations say more about what’s going on within us than what is happening around us. That’s why just saying no is an overly simplistic understanding of this gospel and an inadequate response to temptation. Temptation is less about a choice and more about our identity and direction in life.

Who am I? What is my life all about? These are the questions we face and respond to every time we are tempted. We face ourselves and learn the ways in which our life has become disfigured and distorted, disconnected from the original beauty of our creation and the transfiguring presence of God. The type of temptations we experience are unique to each one of us because they reveal what’s inside us, what fills us. Whatever is going on inside us, is triggered by external temptations.

Jesus, Luke says, “was full of the Holy Spirit.” We know that as we read and hear the temptation story, but Jesus had to discover it as he lived it. Temptation offers us something to be discovered and the opportunity to recover the fullness of our identity. So let me ask you this, and I mean it in the best possible way: What are you full of? What fills your life?

Think about what tempts you. What causes you to stumble and fall? What distracts you? Who or what pushes your buttons? Where do you get caught and trapped? What circumstances make you react in a way you wish you wouldn’t? This is not about the people, situations, or things. This is about you and discovering what fills and directs your life. What’s going on in you? What do you see?

Regardless of what you see there within you, temptations are just ongoing diagnosis. It’s not a final judgement, a conclusion, or your grade on God’s final exam. We don’t pass or fail our temptations. We learn the truth about how we see ourselves. We learn the truth about the direction our life is headed and who we are becoming. This is often painful, but it is the way that God reshapes and refocuses our life. Remember, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

So, what if this Lent we follow our temptations? I don’t mean we just say yes and give in to them. And I don’t mean we just say no and turn away from them. What if we follow the learning they offer us? Where would they take us? What would they give us? They would give us back ourselves. They would return us to the truth of who we are, daughters and sons of God, beloved children, with whom he is well pleased. That’s the gift of temptation and the good the devil unwittingly assists.

And one more thing; following Jesus' trials we read, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." In essence, the devil was saying, "I'll be back." It sounds threatening but we need not be afraid of the devil's empty bluster. If you do become distracted by his cunning, remember the voice of Jesus who says, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." See Jesus who says, "They will 'see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory." Trust in Jesus who says, "I'll be back to redeem you, my beloved bride." "I'll be back and that's a promise." Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.