

FROM BETRAYAL TO REDEMPTION

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Luke 4:1-13

Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness

4 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,² where for forty days he was tempted^[a] by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’^[b]”⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.⁶ And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours.”⁸ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’^[c]”⁹ The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here.¹⁰ For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;’¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’^[d]”¹² Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’^[e]”¹³ When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Back in the 19th century it was fashionable for some biblical scholars to talk about the “*simple faith of Jesus*.” In their account of the Christian faith, Jesus preached a simple, straightforward faith—love your neighbor, or be kind to others, or something wonderfully simple and straightforward like that. Jesus, according to these commentators, had a simple message for simple people. Most of his parables were simple little stories addressed to uncomplicated rural people, or so they surmised.

Then, according to the popular account, the apostle Paul comes along with all of his highfalutin talk and complex writing about the simple faith of Jesus, and the church became a major culprit in this account, constantly making confusing what Jesus intended to be simple, direct, and immediately comprehensible.

For example, why can’t Christians just say, “*I believe in God*” and let it go at that? Isn’t that really at the heart of matter? Why must Christian theology claim that we just don’t just believe in God, but we also believe that God is the Trinity—God is not simply God, but God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Why does it have to be so blooming complicated and difficult?

So here we are on the first Sunday in Lent, and our Gospel concerns the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. In all the Gospels, the temptation in the wilderness is when we first see Jesus in action. Matthew, Mark, and Luke introduce Jesus by showing us Jesus in action, Jesus under assault by Satan, Jesus being tempted in the wilderness.

In the wilderness, note that Satan does not offer Jesus just any old temptation. Satan’s temptation is related to the identity of Jesus. The heavenly voice at his baptism said that Jesus was the “*Son of God*.” Jesus is intimately related to God, as intimately related as a parent to a child. But what does that mean? If Jesus is God in the flesh, God standing before us, then what does that tell you about the nature of God?

Now it might be possible for us to think of the identity of God as a simple matter. God is whatever we consider to be large, powerful, and in control. God is the one who brings order, or the one who can do anything God wants, or whatever vague characteristics we might happen to want God to have.

But now, here in the wilderness, we find ourselves face to face with God as Jesus Christ. And it is right

there that God gets complicated.

It might be possible to completely describe God with the words “love,” or “power” if we had never met Jesus. But as is so typical with scripture, when we really look at Jesus, things get complicated because God is that way.

Look at the temptations that Jesus refused. They are all things that we would consider to be good, worthwhile, and desirable. The first temptation is bread. Bread surely stands for all the material things in life. Jesus has been fasting for 40 days. He is very hungry. Satan says, “*If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.*” What is more basic to life than the need for food? What is that which leads desperate people to desperate acts like war and revolution more than the need for bread? If one wanted to do some real good for humanity, wouldn’t it be wonderful if one could turn stones into bread and feed the earth’s hungry people?

But Jesus refuses. He said that one does not live by bread alone. Whatever he is about, Jesus is about more even than elevating human physical need.

The second temptation takes us to the Holy City, to Jerusalem. This is the center of national pride and religious meaning. Satan takes Jesus to the temple where all the religious people are gathered. Satan proposes a spectacular spiritual demonstration—jump off the pinnacle of the temple and remain unscathed.

Jesus refuses. What sort of God is this who refuses spectacular spiritual feats? What sort of God is this? Wouldn’t it be wonderful, for us poor struggling believers, if Jesus had agreed to do such a spectacular feat? It would certainly make believing in Jesus easier because who is God if not complete power to do anything God wants? But Jesus refuses.

Satan proposes a third temptation. Perhaps Jesus is just not into spiritual power. How about some show of political power, if he is really God, as we expect God to be? Satan offers Jesus a view of all the kingdoms of the world and says that he will give him complete power over all these kingdoms. There are few powers that we modern people recognize more strongly than political power. We live in a world in which it is wrong to expect your child to die for religion, but it is not wrong to offer your child to die for the government. For most of us our government is the source of meaning, protection, and ultimate security. Wouldn’t this be wonderful power for Jesus to have?

Jesus refuses. He will not be a political Messiah, at least not in the way that people expected. Later this will cause Jesus all manner of difficulty when people are confused and disappointed that he doesn’t act like the messianic deliverer that they were expecting (and so desperately wanting!).

So, who is Jesus? This is Luke’s attempt to give us a peek into the identity of Jesus. We are going to see Jesus but we are also going to see the full revelation of God. But right from the beginning, as early as the beginning of the Gospel, out here in the wilderness, Jesus is not the God whom we expected. He refuses to do and to be the very things by which we define deity. He doesn’t act like we expect God to act. Who is this?

If we note the last verses of chapter three in Luke just before the first thirteen verses of chapter 4 I just read for you about Jesus’ temptation you get a good idea about how and why he dealt with the temptations of Satan. Those verses tell us about his Jewish heritage. His teachers of the faith. He answered each of the temptations offered to him with those scriptures of his youth—the teachings of his faith.

To the first temptation he responded: “*It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.”*”

To the second temptation he responded: “*It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”*”

To the third temptation he said: “*It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”*”

Maybe you can see where I am going.

I know a man who says he has “*lost his faith.*” If you sit down and talk with him and inquire, “*Tell me now, what is the faith that you have lost?*” it can be a revealing experience. He tells about growing up in the church as a child, about receiving some rudimentary instruction in the faith as a boy. But he drifted away from the church. And as he drifted from the church, his faith drifted away from him. The faith that he lost appears to be a rather childish mix of some vague, simplistic, commonly held, common sense views about God. As he

became an adult, this faith just collapsed under the weight of the trials and tribulations of life.

"I began to lose my faith," he explained, "when my father became ill when I was a teenager. I was told that if I prayed to God and asked God to heal my dad, he would be healed. Because God could do anything God wanted." His father died and he lost his faith.

Maybe if he had held on to the teachings of his faith he would have been able to deal with the trials and tribulations—he would have had something to lead him when he was tempted to take the easy way.

Duke University gave an honorary degree a few years ago to a man named High Thompson. Even long after the Vietnam War it was still a controversial act. You see on March 16, 1968, Thompson was a young helicopter pilot flying on patrol over the countryside of Vietnam. When he and his crew flew over the village of My Lai, they saw a nightmare taking place below them. United States Army troops in Charlie Company, under the constant pressure of danger and the madness of war, had lost control of their discipline, reason, and humanity, and had begun slaughtering unarmed civilians in the village, most of them women, children, and elderly men. 504 people had already been killed. Thompson set his helicopter down between the troops and the remaining villagers. At great risk to himself, he got out of the helicopter and confronted the officer in charge, William Calley. He then airlifted the few villagers still alive out of My Lai and also radioed a report of the scene that resulted in a halt to the action, thus saving thousands of civilian lives.

Standing there on the platform at the university commencement, Thompson was given the microphone, and he spoke to the question on everyone's minds. How could he have found the moral courage and strength to do what he did that day putting his own life at risk? His answer surprised the audience of graduates and brought them to a thoughtful silence. *"I'd like to thank my mother and father for trying to instill in me the difference between right and wrong," he began. "We were country people. I was born and raised in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and we had very little. But one thing we did have was the Golden Rule. My parents taught me early, 'Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.' That's why I did what I did that day. It's hard to put certain things into words. You're going to have to make many decisions in your life. Please make the right decisions because we're depending on you. God bless you all."*

Major Thompson remembered the words of his faith.

On March 24, 1996, the father of Leon Wieseltier died. Wieseltier was then 44 years old, the literary editor of *The New Republic*, a major political journal and the darling of the intellectual elite in Washington and New York. Despite the fact that he had left his Jewish faith behind in his youth, Wieseltier chose to do what mourning sons are commanded to do.

"In the year that followed, I said the prayer known as the mourner's kaddish three times daily," he wrote, "during the morning service, the afternoon service, and the evening service, in a synagogue in Washington and, when I was away from home, in synagogues elsewhere. It was my duty to say it . . ."

The kaddish, the prayer that Wieseltier prayed three times a day for a year, is not about grief, pain, or loss. It is about praise. It is not a prayer about us and our wounds. It is a prayer about God and God's greatness. *"May his great name be blessed always and forever. Blessed and praised and glorified and raised and exalted and honored and uplifted and lauded be the name of the Holy One."* Three times a day, every day, Wieseltier prayed these words. *"May his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed."*

Soon Wieseltier discovered something unexpected in this strange ritual: he was being changed by the rhythm of prayer.

He wrote: *"It was not long before I understood that I would not succeed in insulating the rest of my existence from the impact of this obscure and arduous practice. The symbols were seeping into everything. A season of sorrow became a season of soul-renovation."*

After his year of reciting the kaddish, Leon Wieseltier went with his family to the cemetery for the dedication of his father's grave. Friends and family huddled in the cold, windswept graveyard. The rabbi asked him to read a psalm. *"And he shall be like a tree, planted by the rivers of water . . ."* he began. Then the rabbi instructed him to read another psalm, but Wieseltier did not read it. Instead, he sang. He stepped closer to the

grave, and he sang, *“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”* Wieseltier said, *“My song grew, as if to make room within it for all the true and punished people who gathered around it, to shield them with its splendor and to seal them with its peace.”*

Then the service was almost over, but there was yet one thing left to do. Standing there in an icy cemetery, looking at his father’s grave, occupying that space between faith and doubt, that place where faith and meaning are rested, Wieseltier recited once more the kaddish. Like Jesus in that devil-infested wilderness calling upon the words of faith he had learned as a child, Wieseltier stood in his own wilderness and called upon the words he had been given. *“May his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed.”* High Thompson stood on a battlefield in Vietnam and recited: *“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”*

Leon Wieseltier withstood the grief of his life, not by running from faith, but by being strengthened and guided by his Sabbath School lessons.

When Jesus was a boy, his life was filled with such practices. Luke tells us that *“it was his custom”* to go to the synagogue. He did not go only to preach, to stir up the people, or to make a cameo appearance that could be reported in the New Testament. Jesus went to synagogue sabbath after sabbath. He heard the lessons, he learned the teachings of Torah, he prayed the prayers. *“May his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed.”* Somehow we have forgotten that even Jesus had to learn about his faith; even Jesus was a student. Twice Luke tells us that Jesus grew in wisdom (2:40, 52).

It should not, then, be a surprise to learn that when Jesus was tested by the devil, when Jesus was pushed against the wall and had his calling and loyalty to God pressed to the limits, he did not defend himself or resist the temptations with clever theological points. He quoted Deuteronomy. He quoted truths he had learned as a child, recited in sabbath school, heard time and again in the synagogue. *“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’” “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”*

The words that served him well in the wilderness were engraved on his heart in worship. *“It is written . . . it is written . . . it is written . . . may his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed.”* So, it is with us. When life presses us to the wall, the patterns of faithfulness learned in worship, the habits of our hearts, will be there as a resource.

In Judith Guest’s novel Ordinary People, one character is a middle-aged man going through a classic mid-life crisis. Confused and adrift, every time he overhears a conversation in an elevator or a restaurant that begins *“Now I’m the kind of man who . . .”* he tunes in, hoping to learn some wisdom. But he never does, and he finally admits, *“I’m the kind of man who hasn’t got the foggiest idea what kind of man I am.”*

But Jesus knew who he was, knew what kind of person he was. He was one who knew that life was more than bread alone, one who worshipped the Lord and served only God, one who did not put the Lord to the test. Where did he get this moral courage? Where did he get what it took to withstand the tests of the devil? Week after week in the synagogue, month after month with the Torah, year after year with the prayers. *“May his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed.”*

Why did he do what he did? Where did he find the moral courage? Words taught to him in childhood, repeated over and over, *“Do unto others . . . do unto others . . . do unto others.” “It is written . . . it is written . . . it is written. May his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed.”*

Maybe this Lent is a time to renew our acquaintance with the Bible that teaches the things that will help us when we face tribulations or temptations.