

Scholars suggest that “tempted” may be better translated as “tested.” I think both work.

Luke 4:1-13

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² 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. ³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” ⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And 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. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” ⁹Then 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, ¹⁰for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ ¹¹and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” ¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. For Presbyterians, Lent is “a time of prayer, fasting, self-sacrifice, self-examination and a focusing on the essentials of our faith.”

We do this to prepare for the celebration of the Lord's resurrection at Easter. It is a period of 40 days—like the flood of Genesis, Moses’ sojourn at Mount Sinai, Elijah’s journey to Mount Horeb, Jonah’s call to Ninevah to repent, and Jesus’ time of testing in the wilderness. (The Sundays in Lent are not counted in this reckoning of the time between Ash Wednesday and Easter, as every Lord’s Day is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.)

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/christianyear/worship-resources-lent>

You know the old joke that comes around about every January 6th? Did you make any resolutions for the new year? Have you broken them yet? The same question could be asked about our taking on a discipline for Lent. Did you give something up or take something on? Are you still at it?

We are tempted to give up on the path to the living God and often succumb to it. Let's take a closer look at Jesus' temptation.

Our story begins with the temptation or testing Jesus experiences; the Spirit sent Jesus into the wilderness for a time of fasting. Fasting was a Jewish practice to deepen and enrich one's faith, as it is now for many faith traditions. For us, its purpose is to turn our attention toward God. Jesus fasted for forty days, during which time Satan attacked when he thought Jesus was at his most vulnerable. After this remarkable fast, something beyond our ability, Satan didn't realize that while Jesus was famished, God was with him during the entire fast, strengthening his faith and resolve.

Like Jesus, we know that evil will attack us at our most vulnerable points, so we need to strengthen our faith and offer our vulnerability to God. That is where we are also tested.

Thinking Jesus was weakened, Satan sought to challenge Jesus' trust in God. He wanted him to question whether he was God's son. But Satan failed, for Jesus' time in the wilderness strengthened his identity and sense of vocation as God's son and the world's redeemer.

Satan tests Jesus as he is tempted to take shortcuts to prove his identity and achieve his mission. Satan tries to get Jesus to deny his identity and follow him instead of God. It's the same thing we face.

Jesus has just been baptized, and God has spoken to him, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This is who he is. Satan wants him to doubt that, just like he wants us to doubt we are all God's people.

In the wilderness, Satan shows up and tests him and his resolve to stick with his vocation. Satan also shows up in our lives, seeking to lure us away from God.

Now, I know we are modern people and don't all believe in Satan. But I do. I believe there is a power of evil in the world that has a personality and whose mission is to resist God's will and turn God's people away from God and against each other. And judging by our society, Satan is being pretty successful.

In our story, Satan tempts Jesus to take shortcuts to achieve his mission, to turn from God's path, and to deny his identity as God's son by following a different path than the one God has given him.

Jesus faced Satan during his fasting in the wilderness. We know of the last four tests he faced: one general and three specific.

The first is general. It challenges his identity, who he is, and what he is to be about. The tempter says, "Since you are the son of God." This is a better translation than "If you are the son of God." It's like a dare. The tempter tests him by daring him to use his powers to prove who he is. Since you're the son of God, prove it.

Jesus' first specific temptation is to turn stones to bread to satisfy his hunger. "If you are hungry," and Scripture says he is famished, "command these stones to become bread." We know that Jesus has fed more with less, 5000 and 4000 with a few loaves and fish, but it is not his nature to use his powers for his own sake; he uses them to care for others. This caring is his mission and purpose. And Satan tempts him to depart from his God-given vocation, which is to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. "Use your power for yourself, not for others." The same kind of taunt he experiences on the cross. "Save yourself; come down from the cross."

He resists Satan by his use of Scripture. "One does not live by bread alone." This is a quote from Deuteronomy.

"Since you are God's son," Satan continues with his second specific temptation: "Bow down to me, and I will give the world to you." Again, he responds from Deuteronomy: Worship the Lord your God, serve only God. Besides, part of Jesus'

identity is that of the savior of the world, and God has already given the world to him. He doesn't need from Satan what he already has from God.

Jesus has used his faith, tradition, and Scriptures to rebuff Satan, something we can all do. Twice-beaten Satan changes his tactics. He, too, draws on Scripture, quotes Psalm 91, and challenges Jesus to take a swan dive from the top of the temple and depend on God to catch him.

Again, responding from Deuteronomy, he says, "We are not to test God."

The final test in today's story involves Satan's quoting Scripture, which shows that it's not enough to use the Bible. Even the evil one can do that; we must also trust in the living God, whose love supports the scriptures and helps us maintain our identity. If our use of Scripture is not backed by God's love, we need to try again.

Note that these tests are about who Jesus is, whether he will serve God and God's purposes or give in to Satan and attempt to use the wrong means to accomplish his goals.

One of the plays I still remember from college is *Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S. Lewis, where Thomas a' Becket faces Henry II's assassins. As he waits, he experiences four temptations. The first of the four temptations is to do nothing; to leave well enough alone, the second is to align with the king, and the third is to ally with the barons who oppose the king. He rejects these, and then the fourth and most deadly temptation comes. He is to seek the glory of being a martyr, and he responds to this last one, calling it the greatest treason to do the right thing for the wrong reason.

That's how it is: temptation looks good and can be readily justified. The danger is that it can distort our identity and vocation as God's people.

In today's story, bread, power, and safety are all good things, but Satan could use anything. One author suggests it could be youth, beauty, wealth, power, prestige, and possessions, which all can be good but not worth giving up our essential nature and souls to move away from God toward something else. We each have weak spots and are tested where we are vulnerable.

As David Lose says, we are assaulted daily to change our allegiance from the one who created and redeemed us to some meager substitute.

The temptations we face daily are subtle. They begin with the question, "What difference would this little thing make?" or even a half-hearted "This seems okay. Who will it hurt? It makes no real difference to anyone." But it does to us; it hooks us and leads us to move toward things that make a difference without even noticing it. We can move toward things that weaken our spirit and make us forget our identity as God's people.

We know that Jesus' relationship with God allows him to overcome the temptations and pass the test. How do they apply to us? Jesus is tempted to take shortcuts to achieve his mission, and Satan tests him to deny his identity. In our lives, we experience both. In our evening study of Hebrews, we read that Jesus was tempted in every way like us. He knows and understands what faces us every day. He identifies with us, and through him, God experiences what we do. That's why God gave us the tools of faith to overcome our temptations. God understands what we go through. When we only rely on ourselves rather than God, we tend to fall short. Although we fall short, Jesus leads us on a path to lessen those failures. That path is to remember our identity as God's children and trust our faith in God to help us choose. Lent reminds us that there are second chances; we can pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and start all over again. Picking up scripture, prayer, and fasting, to name a few, help us remember who we are and whose we are.

The passage ends with:

The last line, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time," reminds us that temptation and temper don't give up; they are persistent, and we must be on our guard.

Remembering Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Terminator, Satan says, "I'll be back." Lent is a time of spiritual discipline. We train ourselves to live Godly and faithful lives and become stronger and stronger so that we, too, can face the tempter when Satan, the devil, the evil one, or the power of evil, whichever name you prefer, shows up. And we answer, "I'll be ready with God's help."

But like Rocky, we can spend time preparing so at the end of Rocky III when Rocky taunts Clubber Lang with “You ain’t so bad, you ain’t nothing, is that all you got!” But unlike Rocky, our power comes not from “The Eye of the Tiger” but from the Word of God.