

When Tempted to Conform

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Hebrews 4:12-16 (Good News Translation) ¹² The word of God is alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet, to where joints and marrow come together. It judges the desires and thoughts of the heart. ¹³ There is nothing that can be hid from God; everything in all creation is exposed and lies open before his eyes. And it is to him that we must all give an account of ourselves. ¹⁴ Let us, then, hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we have a great High Priest who has gone into the very presence of God – Jesus, the Son of God. ¹⁵ Our High Priest is not one who cannot feel sympathy for our weaknesses. On the contrary, we have a High Priest who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us have confidence, then, and approach God's throne, where there is grace. There we will receive mercy and find grace to help us just when we need it.
- Matthew 4:1-11 (Good News Translation) ¹ Then the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the Devil. ² After spending forty days and nights without food, Jesus was hungry. ³ Then the Devil came to him and said, "If you are God's Son, order these stones to turn into bread."
⁴ But Jesus answered, "The scripture says, 'Human beings cannot live on bread alone, but need every word that God speaks.'"
⁵ Then the Devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, the Holy City, set him on the highest point of the Temple, ⁶ and said to him, "If you are God's Son, throw yourself down, for the scripture says, 'God will give orders to his angels about you; they will hold you up with their hands, so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones.'"
⁷ Jesus answered, "But the scripture also says, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"
⁸ Then the Devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in all their greatness. ⁹ "All this I will give you," the Devil said, "if you kneel down and worship me."
¹⁰ Then Jesus answered, "Go away, Satan! The scripture says, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!'"
¹¹ Then the Devil left Jesus; and angels came and helped him.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Remembering the life and mission of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. helps us embrace, embody and expand the saving power of God's love shown in Jesus.

Having just celebrated the birth of Jesus a month ago, it's always a little curious that we don't know much about the early years of Jesus. We know that he was circumcised on the eighth day. On the fortieth day Mary and Joseph took him to the Temple to be dedicated as part of the purification ritual for the new mother. When he was age twelve we remember the story of him wandering away from his parents; Mary and Joseph found him in the temple engaged in conversation with the Temple's teachers.

And then... he was an adult. After that "hanging-out-in-the-Temple" episode at age twelve, the gospels pick up his story when he was around thirty years old.¹ That's when Jesus sought to undergo the ritual of baptism.

In particular, he wanted to receive it from a traveling preacher we know as John the Baptist.² John's message was simple: he preached that God's long-awaited savior was coming, and people needed to take stock of their lives and probably shape up. John's message? "Repent!" (which means to turn away from what's bad or to turn toward what's good). Being baptized was a way of signaling one's sincere commitment to repentance. John wondered why

¹ Luke 3:23

² John's gospel never actually says that Jesus was baptized.

Jesus would seek baptism to signal his desire to take stock of his life. But Jesus wanted to. John baptized Jesus, and the Holy Spirit filled Jesus even more.

Then we get to The Temptations. Not the classic Motown group. The wilderness experience. Matthew, Mark and Luke all report that the same Spirit that enfolded Jesus when he was baptized now led him away. Away from the life-giving waters of the River Jordan. Out into the wilderness. Expansive, arid, rugged, barren wilderness. Rocks. Dirt. Rocks on dirt. Occasionally some succulent weeds, maybe some scrub brush like the so-called broom tree, here and there an actual acacia tree. Sheep and goats could find something to nibble on, but nothing we'd consider a fruit or vegetable. Other than caves, little shelter from the daytime sun and the nighttime chill. Wilderness was the specialty of the wilderness. No wonder locals believed that the wilderness was the home of evil spirits.³

That seemed to materialize for Jesus – a spirit tempted him. Over the centuries that tempting, testing spirit has become personified as Satan or the Devil or the Tempter. Why would the Holy Spirit put Jesus in the path of temptation? Wouldn't it be helpful if we could know why Jesus had to endure temptation?

One way to understand it is that it was through these temptations that Jesus discerned how he was going to go about encouraging people to follow him to a life of faithfulness.

- I. The Tempter suggested that the fasting, hungry Jesus change stones into bread. If he could do that for himself, he could endear himself to the masses by meeting peoples' need for daily bread, too.
- II. The Tempter prodded the unknown Jesus to prove he had an "inside track" with Almighty God by hurling himself off a pinnacle of the Temple, since God was certain to send protecting angels to assure that harm never came to his beloved.
- III. The Tempter enticed the unestablished Jesus to acquire an instant power base in all the kingdoms of the world simply by worshiping and submitting to the power of The Tempter.

In all three instances, Jesus resisted the temptation. He responded to The Tempter with strength, conviction, faith found in words of scripture... even when Satan tried to twist scripture for his own deceitful purposes.

That's one way we can understand the episode of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. It showed the method Jesus chose to proclaim the good news of God's love: not by miracles or manipulation, but by connecting with people face to face, listening, caring, reaching out with empathy and acts of kindness. First to twelve, then to dozens, then hundreds, then multitudes. The experience of those temptations confirmed how Jesus wanted to live. That's one way we might appreciate that biblical episode of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness.

And there's another way that might be helpful. As people who claim to want to follow the example and be shaped by the teachings of Jesus, we face temptation *every day*. Our temptation? Conformity. We're pressured all the time to give in to society's subtle, seductive temptations to be self-centered.

First, advertising bombards us constantly with messages urging us to spend money on services or products. They try to assure us that it's okay because "we deserve it." *Stand in line for the newest cellphone, even though the current one works fine? That big vacation? So what if we're paying off the credit card bills seven months after we returned?* Our culture pressures us to conform to the pressure to put ourselves above everyone else by what we do with the money we have.

Then, peer pressure pushes us to do what we can to "keep up with the Joneses" (and I feel sorry for anyone named Jones – surely they don't deserve to be singled out by that old adage). But peer pressure – though unspoken – is powerful. *Join that club like they did. Lease a new car like they did. Be sure your kids get in that special program like theirs did.*

³ J.C. Fenton. St. Matthew. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963, 63.

Even our privilege of government of, by and for the people is affected by the temptation to be self-centered. Think of a time when you opted to support or oppose a particular referendum or candidate because of how it would affect you personally rather than because of how you felt it would impact the common good? None of us probably have to think too hard to come up with an example. Society tempts us to be more concerned with what's in our own personal interest, even at the expense of the common good.

And yet that's not what we learn from Jesus. Let's remember how he responded to each of those temptations he experienced in the wilderness, each time quoting from the book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Scriptures.

First, Jesus said, "We don't live just on daily bread, but on every word that God speaks." And he wasn't referring just to what God says in the words of Holy Scripture. We live by God's word that spoke creation into existence. We live by God's word that breathed the spark of life into this lump of human clay. We live by God's word that gave us knowledge of *our* existence and God's. We live by God's word-made-flesh; God has claimed and redeemed us in the person of Jesus the Son.

Then to the second temptation Jesus responded, "There's no need to test God." Why? Because God's care is not in doubt. If we *know* God cares for us, there's no reason to check to be sure.

And to the third temptation Jesus said quite simply, "Worship and serve only God."

Again,

1. *In every way we depend on God.*
2. *We have no reason to test God.*
3. *So we worship and serve God.*

That's what Jesus proclaimed in undergoing the trials in the wilderness. That's how Jesus calls us to respond to a world that wants us to conform to its values by embracing self-centeredness rather than devotion to God's way.

Here's what St. Paul wrote to the Christians who were living in the midst of the power and wealth of the Roman Empire. In Romans Chapter 12 Paul cautioned, "Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God – what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect."⁴

"...Compromise with the ways of the world is a continuing seduction. It is indeed difficult for us to worship and serve God only."⁵ That's why we strive to embody the testimony of scripture. We've seen that when Jesus was faced with temptations to adopt the ways of the world, he used scripture to guide his path and strengthen his resolve. When we leave this sanctuary and face the temptation to conform with the ways of the world the other 167 hours of the week, the verses we heard earlier from the Letter to the Hebrews can be our guide and strength. Here they are in a contemporary translation:

Now that we know what we have – Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God – let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all – all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.⁶

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⁴ Romans 12:2 Good News Translation

⁵ Douglas R.A. Hare. *Matthew – Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1993, 26

⁶ Hebrews 4:14-16 The Message translation