

Tempted But Triumphant

A sermon in the Lenten series “Reading Between the Lines”

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March 6, 2022—First Sunday in Lent

Luke 4:1-13 CEB

¹ Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. ² There he was tempted for forty days by the devil. He ate nothing during those days and afterward Jesus was starving. ³ The devil said to him, “Since you are God’s Son, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

⁴ Jesus replied, “It’s written, *People won’t live only by bread.*”

⁵ Next the devil led him to a high place and showed him in a single instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ The devil said, “I will give you this whole domain and the glory of all these kingdoms. It’s been entrusted to me and I can give it to anyone I want. ⁷ Therefore, if you will worship me, it will all be yours.”

⁸ Jesus answered, “It’s written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*”

⁹ The devil brought him into Jerusalem and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, “Since you are God’s Son, throw yourself down from here; ¹⁰ for it’s written: *He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you* ¹¹ and *they will take you up in their hands so that you won’t hit your foot on a stone.*”

¹² Jesus answered, “It’s been said, *Don’t test the Lord your God.*” ¹³ After finishing every temptation, the devil departed from him until the next opportunity.

Among the shelves of books in my office I have two shelves wider than my outstretched arms filled with books that are called biblical commentaries. Each biblical commentary represents a professor’s scholarly career of intense, focused research of a book of the Bible, having studied the oldest available Hebrew or Greek texts.

Most of these commentaries focus on a single book of the Bible, like Deuteronomy or Proverbs or Romans. For many of the Bible’s sixty-six books I may have just one commentary. But for other books of the Bible that I may preach on more frequently—like the gospels, or Psalms, Genesis, Exodus, or the Book of Acts—for those I might have two or three or more separate commentaries.

A biblical commentary usually presents two kinds of information. First they analyze the text.

- So for instance, in today’s reading from Luke’s gospel about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, a scholar might point out that everything Jesus says in this story are quotations from Old Testament scripture.
- Or a scholar might note that there were no witnesses to the temptation experience—it was just Jesus and the devil. What’s the significance? Well, Jesus could have told others about this incident later. Or this story could have been created by the evangelists as a narrative way to describe the kinds of temptations Jesus experienced in his everyday life.

- One scholar's analysis proposed that this time Jesus spent in the wilderness seems intended to recall the Israelites' time in the wilderness when they escaped slavery in Pharaoh's Egypt. How? Just consider all of the parallels: "Like Israel, Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. The period of forty days also evokes the period of Israel's testing [for forty years – the number "forty" being an ancient literary symbol meaning "a long time"]. The temptation to make bread evokes memories of the manna God supplied Israel. Even more clearly, the three quotations from Deuteronomy link [Jesus'] temptation scene with... the temptations of Israel, which involved bread (Exod. 16:15), testing the Lord (Exod. 17:1-7), and idolatry (Exod. 32)...."¹

Biblical commentaries can provide you with new insight into Bible passages you may have heard over and over.

The other thing biblical commentaries provide besides analysis of the text is, as the name suggests, commentary to help you try to figure out what the Bible passages might mean. When you read a biblical commentary you'll see that scholars are very knowledgeable – they know a lot about their particular topic, but they also know a lot about the rest of the Bible, too. They're conversant with what's been written by others whose research is in the same field as theirs. They'll suggest their interpretation of what the scripture means, and they'll explain why they agree or disagree with what other scholars have written.

So... what *does* it mean, this story about Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil? Why was it included in the gospel, and what might we take from having heard it? As you can imagine, any particular passage of the Bible could be interpreted in many reasonable ways. For this passage about the temptation of Jesus:

- One interpretation, as we've noted, is that the temptation story draws parallels with the story of Israel wandering in the Sinai wilderness. This is intended to convince the Jewish people that Jesus follows in the tradition of their revered leader and prophet Moses.
- Another interpretation is that this story reinforces Jesus' identity. For instance, when the devil said, "If you are the Son of God," that reminds the reader that in the previous chapter describing the baptism of Jesus, the voice of God declared, "You are my Son."

Today I suggest we might consider this interpretation: this episode illustrates the church teaching that Jesus is, at the same time, fully divine and fully human. Let that sink in for a moment. How is that possible? In our world things either *are* something or

¹ New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX: Luke – John. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 98a

they are *not* that thing; they can only be one thing at a time: for instance, a frying pan cannot *also* be a flamingo.

And yet we embrace the teaching that Jesus is fully God *and* fully human — a “holy mystery,” it’s called. You’ve heard the words from the beginning of the Gospel of John that assert, *“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”*² *The Word was with God in the beginning....* [and later John adds]¹⁴ *The Word became flesh and made his home among us.”*²

So how does today’s story of Jesus affirm the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus? First, Jesus really knew what it felt like to be tempted. Think about his time in the wilderness when he went without eating. Even if that long period of “forty days” was only five or even ten days, Jesus would have been famished because his physical body hungered for fuel. For our part, we complain that we’re “starving” when we haven’t eaten for four or five hours. Jesus knew what it was to be tempted. He was completely human like you and me.

But Jesus resisted the tempter’s baiting to transform the stone at his feet into a basketful of pita bread. Jesus refused to use his unlimited divine power to satisfy a personal want. We, on the other hand, give in to temptation: when we haven’t eaten in three or four hours we break out the snacks because we’re “famished.” Jesus was completely divine, able to resist even a very present, gnawing temptation like satisfying his own hunger.

Jesus is worthy of our loyalty, he is worthy of our worship, he’s worth following because he is God the Son who knows what it is to be human like you and me. That’s expressed so clearly by the New Testament’s Letter to the Hebrews which states, *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet he did not sin.”*³

If you had any hesitation about devoting your life to following and serving and worshiping God the Son Jesus Christ, be assured and encouraged by this gospel story describing how he was “tempted in every way, just as we are — yet he did not sin.” Jesus is our brother who knows the challenges we face living our daily lives, and Jesus is our Lord and Master who graciously and mercifully brings us into union with the Living God of Heaven.

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² John 1:1-2, 14a CEB

³ Hebrews 4:15 NIV