

Luke 4:1-13
Psalm 91

Jesus Tried and Tested
Crossroads Christian Church
February 7, 2016 Lent 1C

I want to begin a little differently today. Let's begin with a picture. It's a drawing by the famous artist Rembrandt of the temptation of Jesus. It's not a fancy oil painting, but more of a sketch. And I want to share what a UCC pastor by the name of Matt Fitzgerald says about it.

"Rembrandt drew several depictions of the devil tempting Jesus. In one of them the two look like friends. They appear to be ambling down a country road, deep in conversation. The devil is a half step behind Jesus. His head is skeletal, but there is an urgent, deeply human look on his face. He is reasoning with Jesus, not menacing him. One of his wings is thrown over Jesus' shoulder in an almost familial manner. He leans in, mouth open slightly, eyes on Christ, speaking quietly, a heavy stone in his hands. He holds the stone out as if it were a gift. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." It is a scene of powerful intimacy. Despite his wings, Satan does not look monstrous. He looks reasonable. Most of our temptations are."¹ (unquote) Interesting point of view, huh?

Most of our temptations are reasonable. "It seemed like a good idea at the time," we might say afterwards. We can think of lots of good reasons to say or do things that end up being destructive. She deserves that put-down. If they paid me better, I wouldn't have to skim off my expense account. Our marriage is in a rut, and so-and-so sure is cute. Even after another drink, I'm still a better driver than most people on the road. Since I'm late on this assignment, I'll just copy some stuff off the internet. The teacher will never know. Or, we can justify not doing things that we should have done; or not saying "I'm sorry" after an argument. Most of our temptations are reasonable.

So it's easy to make connections with the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness for forty days. Just to understand the story a little better, let's have a little background first. Remember Moses being on Mount Sinai for forty days, receiving the law of God? He wasn't being tempted by the devil, but the people of Israel got tired of waiting for him, and assumed that he might have died up there. So Aaron gathered their gold jewelry that they had carried from Egypt, melted it all down, and made a golden calf for them to worship. Seemed like a good idea at the time.

Even the forty years that the Hebrews spent in the wilderness served for them as a time of testing; tests they failed over and over again, until finally the new generation was able to enter the Promised Land. It's no

¹ Matt Fitzgerald, *Homiletical Perspective on Luke 4:1-13, Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Volume 1*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 93.

surprise that Jesus' answers to Satan were from the Book of Deuteronomy, which summarized that wilderness wandering.

Centuries after the Exodus, Elijah had a showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. He won. Or rather, God won, setting the soggy pile of wood on fire with a lightning bolt from heaven. But Jezebel the queen of Israel, a Baal worshipper, wanted vengeance, and sent her troops after him. So Elijah fled south, and spent forty days in the wilderness. He was discouraged and depressed. He wanted to give up. He might as well die. But God came to him in the silence after the earthquake, wind, and fire, and called him back into ministry.

The story of the Temptation of Jesus is important enough that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell it. Hebrews 4:15 mentions it, too. "Also, let's hold on to the confession since we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, God's Son; because we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin." (CEB) (unquote)

Our Gospel lesson takes us backward in Luke from the turning point of Jesus' ministry, the Transfiguration, to a point before the beginning of Jesus' ministry, before Jesus preached, before Jesus did any miracles, before Jesus

Jesus had just been baptized and had just received God's blessing. What was his ministry to be? Jesus went on a forty-day spiritual retreat, we might call it; but not on a retreat center with other pilgrims and meals in the dining hall. He went into a rugged, dry, desolate wilderness. He was tempted; not just once near the end of his time there, but for the whole time. Jesus fasted. Think of the most hungry you've ever been; Jesus was much hungrier. Satan tempted him—if you're really who you think you are, you can feed yourself by turning these rocks into bread. So Jesus was tempted both to prove himself and to break his fast by misusing his power. But no—Jesus knew that his strength came from God, not himself. Jesus knew scripture enough to answer, people don't live by bread alone.

Then Christ was taken to a high place, and offered the chance to rule the earth, to become king over all creation. "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. Therefore, if you will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus turned him down. "It is God who is ruler over all."

Satan, nothing if not persistent, tempted him again, quoting scripture, this time. It's easy to quote scripture for your own purposes, and not for God's purposes—and said, "throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple, with all the crowds gathered below, and let the angels catch you. Doesn't it say right there in Psalm 91, "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone"? What a showstopper that would be! Everyone would know right from the beginning

that you're the Messiah. With me as your press agent, you'll go far, kid." And Jesus replied, "It's God that you're putting to the test, not me. Nothing doing."

These temptations were real, and Jesus had real choices to make, and he chose to be faithful. Let me share how Fred Craddock sums them up. "We may surmise that Jesus is struggling with what it really means to be about God's business. This first temptation is not only personal but social: Will Jesus' ministry be one of turning stones to bread? The second is political: Will Jesus submit to the ruler of this world in order to achieve good for the people of this world? The third is religious: Will Jesus win Jerusalem by coercing faith, avoiding death by the display of supernatural power?"² (unquote)

Luke ends the story by saying, "After finishing every temptation, the devil departed from him until the next opportunity." (4:13) That time would come after the Last Supper, on the Mount of Olives. Jesus told his disciples to pray that they would be able to withstand temptation. Then, he prayed in anguish, asking that the cup of suffering could be passed before him. Yet he answered his own cry with, "Not my will, but yours be done."

In this season of Lent, I invite you to make a choice that will improve your life. I'm not talking about doing something good to buy God's favor. Jesus Christ already did that for you. Just do it as a favor to yourself, and to other people in your life. Maybe it can be something to improve your health. Maybe it can be taking a step to mend a broken relationship. Maybe it can be in facing a moral dilemma, in standing up against taking ethical shortcuts at work. Maybe, if you're feeling down upon yourself, you can re-evaluate who you are as a beloved child of God, and name your strengths, your talents, your gifts, your blessings. Maybe it can be giving more of yourself in a loving relationship, or maybe in finding the strength to withdraw from an abusive relationship. Maybe it can be in naming a destructive habit and taking steps to overcoming it. Maybe it can be in telling someone that you love them, if you do and you're not in the habit of saying so. Maybe it can be in overcoming hurt feelings that have alienated you from the church, or from a family member. Whatever you choose, try it. Work on it. Maybe you'll succeed this time and maybe you won't, but that's okay. You gave it a good shot. Remember that whatever the choices you make, you are still a child of a loving God. Loving you, redeeming you, forgiving you—these are choices that God has already made about you. You are a beloved child of God. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon

² Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation Series), John Knox Press, 1990, p. 56.