

“What Can We Do?” – Luke 4:1-13

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Let us pray: Dear Heavenly Father, give us the courage to walk with your Son in faithfulness. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, give us wisdom to recognize the temptations that would lead us astray from a life of faith, and grant us the power to resist them. And as we move through this season of Lent, help us to recognize that the way of the cross is the way to life eternal in your heavenly kingdom. This we ask in Christ’s holy name. Amen.

We live in a world that seems to be out of control much of the time. Every single day we are alive, we hear or read about destruction, terror, murder, and senseless acts. We see uncertainty in our economy and wonder what the future holds. What shall we do as a society? What can we do as individuals? How can we prepare ourselves? We live in a fallen world and sin abounds. Each of us struggles with sin and daily we are faced with temptations. That is our reality. We all experience walking in the wilderness with our backpacks of vulnerabilities. Even Jesus, the Son of God, was faced with temptation. What did He do? He gives us an example and strategy to help us respond.

Our Gospel lesson for today/this morning, the temptation by Satan in the wilderness, is one of those stories in the life of Jesus that is packed full of interesting dynamics that can inspire us on our journey of faith. And the fact that this story occurs at the same point in the life of Christ in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, begs us to take notice and listen with interest.

Before Jesus begins his ministry, he goes to John the Baptist, where he is baptized in the Jordan River. And we are told that when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and a voice from heaven declared, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

Isn’t it interesting, that immediately after his baptism, and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, where he encounters temptation for forty days. Wouldn’t you think that to receive the presence of God’s Spirit, to hear the voice from heaven confirming his identity as God’s beloved Son, would lead Jesus to experience peace and joy, and immediately then begin his ministry?

But that didn’t happen. His baptism led Jesus into a struggle with temptation. In his humanity, Jesus was confronted by the tempter who would like to have turned him away from the Spirit’s guidance to walk in harmony with God.

This suggests to me, that those of us who have received the gift of God's Spirit through our baptism, and proclaimed to be sons and daughters of God's kingdom, better plan on encountering temptation on our journey of faith as well. After all, if the Spirit is present to encourage us to take up our cross and walk with our Lord in submission to the will of God, we can't help but be tempted, for the path Jesus walks is often at odds with the ways of our world.

So let's take a look at the temptations that were put before Jesus. And the first temptation is so subtle, that it often goes unnoticed. The tempter says, "If you are the Son of God..." "If?" Jesus has just come from his baptism, where he received the gift of God's Spirit and heard the voice from heaven proclaim him to be the Son of God. "If you are?" Is this not a statement designed to lead Jesus to question the validity of what he experienced at his baptism?

How often this temptation comes to each of us who have received the gift of God's Spirit in our baptism. I have friends, good friends, who have asked me, "Jon, how do you know that God forgives you? How do you know that there is life after death? Is baptism really important, or is it just a human ritual?"

In all of these questions, there is that subtle voice of the tempter, calling into question the validity of our identity as a baptized child of God. In all of these questions there is that subtle voice of the tempter, calling into question the validity of the voice of God, proclaimed through Scripture, that assures us of God's forgiving grace, and life beyond the grave.

At the root of all temptation is the seed of doubt, which challenges our belief and trust in the Word of God. And unless I stand alone, [and yes, I know that I'm the only one standing at this moment] we have all wrestled with this temptation on our journey of faith. Yet, as Jesus demonstrates throughout this text, God's Spirit led him to trust in the Word of God as proclaimed in the Scriptures, which enabled him to avoid the tempter's snare.

Consider the temptation for Jesus to use his status as the Son of God to meet his own personal needs. Our text tells us that Jesus fasted – ate nothing- for forty days. And when those days were over, Luke tells us that Jesus was famished. Now there is an understatement if I ever heard one. And just for the record, fasting for forty days is not a diet plan suggested by Scripture.

Nevertheless, the tempter says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Well, I believe that if Jesus could multiply five loaves of bread

to feed 5000 people, he could have turned that stone into bread to satisfy his own hunger – but he didn't!

Jesus resisted the temptation to use his relationship with God for his own personal benefit, and he did so by calling on the power of God's Word. He responded to the temptation by citing a passage from the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy. There it is written, "God humbled you by letting you hunger...in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

Does this temptation not also tug at us? Has not each of us, at one time or another, asked God for some personal benefit. I once had a person, who had just purchased a handful of gambling tickets, come up to me and ask me if I would bless them. I looked at her and said, "Ma'am, if I were to bless your tickets, God would probably remove all of the winning numbers." She never asked me to bless her tickets again.

Jesus then was tempted to seek earthly power. It was a power that many in his day would have loved to see him take by the horns and exercise with authority. After all, Jesus could have brought an end to the Roman occupation of his people, established peace, and governed justly.

But Jesus realized that true authority and power belonged to God. And I believe he also knew that with the acquisition of earthly power comes the temptation to limit one's horizons and focus to earthly matters. Again, Jesus resisted the tempter by quoting from Deuteronomy, where Moses warned the people about how easy it is, when there is prosperity and peace, to forget that it is God who gives us life and blessings. Therefore, Jesus echoes Moses, saying, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

How we might learn from our Lord. We have all known persons who have been entrusted with the power of leadership who have let it consume them, not just in government, not just in corporate structures, not just in civic matters, but also in family situations, and even the church. We live in a culture that seems to thrive on power, while ignoring the ultimate authority of the One who gives us life.

Again the tempter turns to Jesus, with the phrase, "If you are the Son of God" – this time to test his faith. He places Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple, and dares him to jump, trying to turn the table on Jesus by citing Scripture to him. And the passage the tempter quotes from Psalm 91 is accurate. But Jesus saw through the ploy. Jesus was able to place these passages into the context of the whole message of God's Word, and again retort with a passage from Deuteronomy, where Moses said "Do not put the Lord your God to the test..."

How many times have we been tempted to question our faith, or to put God to the test, not only by those who have never opened the cover of the Bible, but also by those who have taken passages of Scripture out of context for their own benefit? How many times have we ourselves been troubled by, or misled by, a particular passage of Scripture, which has caused us to doubt or challenge our own faith.

The responses Jesus gave to the tempter tells us something about the way Jesus walked his life of faith. He not only trusted in the power of God's Spirit, which he received at His baptism, to guide him. He not only trusted in the voice of God that proclaimed Him to be his beloved Son. He also trusted in the voice of God that spoke through the Scriptures to face the temptations that he encountered in life.

So, what can we do when temptations come our way, as they will? We will not be able to resist every temptation that comes our way. We might even have moments of doubt and testing in our faith, as we seek to live the Christian life. But, God has given us three very important things to help fight temptation and to help us live as His faithful children. One, we have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. Second, we have been given the gift of God's Holy Spirit, which can guide us through the struggles of our life. And we have the Scriptures, God's Word for our life, by which we might plot the course to walk in relationship with God.

And through our participation in the life of Christ's church, we are not left alone to our own defenses. We have the support of those who share our faith, to help us navigate through the temptations that come our way, and to experience the forgiving grace of God.

So let us take up our cross, and strive to walk with Christ throughout this Lenten season, and the rest of our lives. For God has claimed us as his own, heirs of his kingdom. In Jesus. Amen.