

“Tested”

Deuteronomy 6:10-17 and 8:2-4;  
Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-14

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Jesus was just baptized—that astounding moment when the dove comes down and connects him with the Holy Spirit. In fact, I’m always a little taken aback by the beginning of the passage for today which follows the baptism. The Spirit leads him into the wilderness. So this is some kind of spiritual exercise the Spirit is leading him to, and he begins to fast and continues to fast for 40 days.

Oftentimes, I think about that and think, “Wow, he has a lot of self-discipline.” But as we were reading in the Richard Rohr book this week, Richard made me think in another way. He suggested that instead of it being about Jesus’ self-discipline (there was some self-restraint there), but it was about emptying himself, opening himself. By removing the rest of his life, going into the wilderness, not eating, he made room for something else.

It makes me think about how many voices are around us so much of the time. Throughout our weeks we hear the voice of media, over and over again, telling us who we are supposed to be. There may be people in our lives who are telling us who we are supposed to be. There are various ways the advertisers tell us that we’ll be happy if we just do X, Y, and Z, or buy it, that is.

It feels like this spiritual exercise for Jesus begins with making room, with emptying himself. When I was on my sabbatical, I took an eight-day silent retreat. I realized as I was on that retreat that it wasn’t about the self-discipline of not talking. It really was about making room for another voice. I didn’t go without food, by the way. But the point was making room for another voice.

The interesting thing about Jesus’ time in the wilderness is that as it is coming to a completion, even in the wilderness when he’s making room, he has to discern the voices he hears. He has to discern when, as it is presented here, the devil asks him these questions. When we look at these temptations, I’ve always thought I’ve got to find, in each temptation, the theme that is there in that particular temptation. Perhaps that’s true.

In the first one, we see Jesus hungry, he just wants to satisfy his own desire, and he’s invited to use his power to do that—to turn this rock into a piece of bread. He knows how to respond, however, to that desire to use his own power for himself, and says, “We don’t live by bread alone.” And really, we should probably recognize that if you hear that phrase, we should know the rest of the sentence. If we listen to the Deuteronomy passage today, we find we don’t live by bread alone, “but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus turns it back to God.

The second temptation is that idea that he can have all this power. He can be the most important person in the world. He can tell everybody what to do. Talk about being in control! He can have it. Of course, the catch in this one is that it comes at the expense of giving his worship, his allegiance to the devil. He identifies it immediately and says, "It says to worship only God." If we look back to the Deuteronomy passage he is quoting, it says either *fear* or *revere God*. It has that sense of really paying attention to God, to serve only God.

Pretty good so far. Then we come to that moment when we find even the devil can quote scripture, which is an interesting thing to think about. The devil is quoting scripture to Jesus, and Jesus has to discern that the devil is using it to try to get him to test God. He says, "It is written, do not test God."

So we can look at those temptations and we can probably come up with temptations like that. The thing that struck me most about these temptations this time is how in each temptation, the invitation is "do this for yourself." Do this for yourself, and this is what you get. Jesus responds with, "It's not about me, it's about God." Each time, "It's not about me, it's about God." You might say he has his priorities straight. He recognizes that it's not all about him. It's not all about satisfying his own desires. He recognizes that sometimes to satisfy our own desires we have to do things we know aren't right. In this case he's asked to bow down to the devil. So there's this contrast between the two.

So how do I turn this into a Valentine's Day sermon? In one way, we could say Valentine's Day is about knowing who we love and wanting to show it. Here, Jesus recognizes who he loves most and who loves him most. It can't stay a self-focused love and be healthy for him. It's to recognize God's love and his love of God, and to keep that straight. It's also that invitation into Lent in which we begin to realize and think about how it's wonderful to follow Jesus, but what happens when Jesus takes me places that are hard, that don't fit with all the things that my friends want to do or all the things my culture tells me to do, or all the things my feelings tell me to do? We could say the first temptation is to "go with your feelings"—change the bread to get what you want. Fit with world—tell God what to do.

As we go through Lent, and follow Jesus, and recognize that sometimes in following him we come up against things that aren't easy, the struggles with the world. I don't know about you, but I can set up this idea about how the world works and I'm pretty sure I'm right about it, and I think that's one of those places Jesus says you've got to let go of. I don't know it all. I don't know all about the way the world works. But God does.

Can I tell God what to do? Take that last temptation where Jesus is supposed to jump off the temple. It's kind of like, who gets to be the teacher? If you go into a classroom, do you get to give the teacher the test? I think some people would like to do that. But, no. Who's got the right to give the test? Often I want to be the one, but it really is God, isn't it? God is our teacher. I've got to think about how I do not know all that is known, and recognize I need God to help me see where I'm wrong and to guide

me. Sometimes it's just about wanting to be part of my group and for that group have all that we might have, and we'll do anything to make that happen. Well, it feels that way sometimes. Or I so want to be part of a group that that's all that matters to me. Or it's back to those feelings of what I want, the desires of my heart, the pangs of hunger, the desire to be satisfied. And, each of these can become more important than our relationship with God.

We all run into all of these struggles. I guess I'm glad to see Jesus run into them as well, and to be my instructor, my guide, and to help me recognize how often when I am struggling, where I am focusing is on myself rather than on God. I'm forgetting God's goodness, God's grace, God's love and trying to grasp something for myself.

As we go into Lent, the idea of letting something go is that we might open ourselves again and remember and notice and look for how God is at work, how God is present. I invite you as you go through these weeks of Lent, if you're going to give something up, if you're going to practice some self-restraint, let it be for the purpose of opening yourselves to God. A wonderful thing to do, actually, is to give something up so that we can actually read scripture, so we can listen for that other voice in the midst of all the voices. It's our invitation: listen for God's voice. After all, where are we really fed? Where does life truly come from? From the mouth of the Lord. So it's an invitation through Lent as we think about the things that we have to walk through—the life, the voices, the struggles, the ways we're tested—we look to the one who also was tested and hear his guidance and open ourselves to God.

My desire is to say, "Have a happy Lent," but it's not quite that easy. I invite you into Lent, and may it be a meaningful Lent; let's put it that way. Amen.