

Sermon Luke 4:1-13 – ‘No Easy Way Out’

First Sunday in Lent

March 9th, 2025

We just heard the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. And I think it is a fascinating story, multi-layered, complex. It is a story that doesn’t only describe one particular event in the life of Jesus, but also holds up a mirror to all of us.

So let’s recap: Jesus – fully divine, but also somehow at the same time fully human – is led by the Spirit into the wilderness right after his baptism. There he is tempted by the devil, aka Satan, during 40 days of fasting and isolation. And just listening to what Satan has to offer, offhand it doesn’t sound so bad at all: ‘Jesus, I know you’re hungry, why don’t you turn this stone into bread? I know you can do it! And imagine – you could feed the world by turning all those stones into bread.’ And we might think: why not? That would take care of a lot of suffering in this world, wouldn’t it?

‘Jesus, look at all the kingdoms, all the principalities, all the tribes of this world. Wouldn’t it be amazing if you could rule them all, just like that? No compassion, no sacrifice, no suffering, no dying involved! Worship me, and it will be all yours.’ And we might think: why not? Surely Jesus, the Son of God, somehow has a way of overpowering the devil. Wouldn’t it be great if Jesus Christ could establish God’s realm of peace and justice, just like that?

‘Jesus, throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple – surely God’s angels are going to come and bear you up. Show your power, like a superhero! Don’t limit your powers – forgo your humanity!’ And we might think: why not? Maybe more people would follow Jesus if he showed his supernatural powers as the Son of God.

We might be tempted to think that the end hallows the means – why doesn’t Jesus just take Satan up on his offer? He could save himself a lot of heartbreak. And suffering. And the experience of death, right?

But God knows – Jesus knows – it’s more complicated than that. Feeding the world by turning stones into bread, by providing the daily bread through such a miracle, first of all would become stale soon – pun intended. Remember how the

people of Israel during their 40 years in the wilderness tired quickly of the manna they didn't have to work for, and how they started complaining? If stones were turned to bread, how would we learn about and appreciate the miracle of growth? How would we learn that some things take time, that we need to have patience, that certain things just cannot be rushed, that it's not all about instant gratification? How could we heed God's call to be stewards of all the miracles God provides, and share of the bounty we are given, if we were just handed the stone turned to bread?

Wielding power by forcing it on people - without them being convinced, without their buy-in - would be coercion, even tyrannical; it wouldn't last. History has proven that all tyrants fall at some point, and their reigns end, often through a disaster – and they are remembered for their infamy, not for the greatness ascribed to them by their followers.

Showing super human powers without compassion and humanity would lead any followers to empty idol worship without any substance – it would be a fad that fades eventually, when we are disappointed because we don't get what we want or expect.

Jesus sees through the devil's schemes. Not coincidentally, 'Satan', which is the Hebrew word for devil, means 'liar', 'cheater', 'disseminator of misinformation'. God knows – Jesus knows – that the devil cannot be trusted, that all his promises are empty and hollow. But still: Jesus IS tempted. Because there is this human side to him. And as human beings, we are easily lured into believing all the satanic forces that are at work in this world – sometimes very openly and bluntly. I don't need to tell you that the slash and burn tactics of the current administration, with its cutting of funding for social and educational programs, the short-sighted elimination of government jobs, the severing of political alliances with democratic nations, and the imposition of tariffs, among many other things, will lead to isolation, which, in the end, is not in the best interest of the regular Joe or Jane – in fact, it will hit those already struggling the hardest. Raw power without mercy and diplomacy is just the kind of power Satan offers Jesus – a power that divides and alienates rather than unites and strengthens - but Jesus rejects it.

But then we buy into many other, and often more subtle, 'truths', which, if we take a closer look at them, turn out to be deceptive. For example that infinite

economic growth and progress is possible and to be achieved at all cost, and that mindless consumption is the engine that drives everything. 'It's the economy, stupid!' However, just last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, the gospel lesson reminded us that where our treasure is, our heart will be – and if we treasure material goods, if we treasure stuff, we hang our hearts on them instead of cherishing the true treasures, like love, relationships, and life to the fullest for all creation – the kind of life God generously offers to all.

Recently I also saw an interesting comment somewhere. It goes something like this: limitless growth within a limited system is the definition of cancer. If this limitless growth isn't stopped, it leads to a certain death. And we experience how our greed for more, and the exploitation of God's good creation has an impact. Climate change, the endangerment of more and more species of animal and plant life, we humans are getting sicker and sicker - why do we just carry on in our destructive ways, or, even worse, backpedal on efforts to protect and restore and work for sustainability? Why don't we get it that we can't go on like this forever?

Why are we so easily buying into the lie that things just are the way they are, and we can't – or shouldn't - change them? Why can we so easily be convinced that there are easy solutions for complex issues, and that there is an easy way out of the messes we got ourselves in – 'solutions' like scapegoating, which is a very convenient method of avoiding and deflecting responsibility. Why are we so easily tempted to believe that we just need a strongman who solves all our issues for us, and we can somehow just trust such a person and sit back and relax and don't have to do anything?

Satan and his willing minions are hard at work in this world, and we are easily tempted to believe all the lies and promises that may seem fulfilled for a moment – hey, aren't we doing great consuming whatever we desire? - but turn out to be empty and hollow in the long run.

There is no easy way out. God knows – Jesus knows. The reign God envisions for all creation – a reign of justice and peace, where there is enough for everyone, and where death will be no more – cannot just be imposed. It requires repentance – which, literally, means a change of heart and mind -, it requires love, it requires mercy, it requires compassion, it requires forgiveness, it requires sacrifice, it requires healing, it requires reconciliation. Admittedly, these are all

concepts often poo-pooed in this day and age. Maybe because all these things are hard, really hard. Maybe because they involve the cooperation of everyone. Maybe because all these things don't offer an easy way out, but force us to take an honest look at ourselves.

Jesus models all these things for us. Jesus shows us what lengths God is willing to go to show us how much we are loved and cherished – without forcing us into a relationship, for that wouldn't be love. This power God wields in and through Jesus Christ – the power of love – may seem weak and feeble in comparison to all other kinds of power we experience in this world – but once we are swept up in it and surrender voluntarily to it – once our hearts and minds are changed, and we look at our neighbor with the eyes of God, through the lens of love and compassion – amazing things happen. We see the realm of God spring forth, like a mustard seed, like a pesky weed that breaks through the concrete. We get glimpses of what God's vision for all creation is – peace and goodwill to all humanity. Life eternal to the fullest for all creation.

Jesus, full of God's Spirit, withstands and rejects Satan's lies and deceptions. It will not be the last time that he is tempted to forgo the way he is called to go – the difficult way of loving service, sacrifice, humility, even humiliation, suffering, and death. Well-meaning Peter will try to convince Jesus a couple of times that there is an easy – or at least easier – way out. But Jesus, who came to bring the truth (and as we all know, the truth often is hard to swallow) – says no to Satan – the liar, the cheater, the deceiver, the giver of empty promises, the spirit that denies the forces of life.

There is a reason why we hear the story of Jesus' temptation during his 40 days in the wilderness every year as we enter the Lenten season. For Lent signifies a 40 day wilderness journey (not counting Sundays) of fasting, of introspection, of prayer, of a closer look at our ways, of repentance. A time we stretch ourselves somehow. It is a time to question the way things are – a time to critically look at all promises made to us, and denouncing lies and deceit – a time to do our best to resist the temptation of picking and choosing the seemingly easy ways out in life.

God was with Jesus in the wilderness. God promises to be with us also, as we tread the difficult ways of love, mercy, peace, and justice. And unlike Satan's promises, God's promise can be trusted. Amen

