

March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022

## Luke 4:1-13 “First Step on the Path”

Today is the first Sunday of Lenten season. Some churches call it a “Lenten Fast” because you’re supposed to give something up like desserts or coffee or some other little guilty pleasure. The rationale here is that if you’re experiencing the absence of something you enjoy every day, you’ll be inspired to take on something that will help you have a closer connection with God. How long does Lenten season last you might ask? Forty days. We started Lent four days ago with our Ash Wednesday service on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. Lent ends on Easter Sunday which this year is on April 17<sup>th</sup>. Some of you might say, “But wait, that’s forty-*six* days, not forty!” That’s because Sundays don’t count. You get a break during the fast because Sundays are always celebration days. So, if you gave up coffee for Lent, you can start your Sundays off with a big ol’ cup before you come to church to celebrate God. Now, the assumption here is that you’ll actually come to church during Lent, so I’m not sure spending your entire Sunday binge-watching the TV shows you missed over the last week is a great example of breaking your fast to celebrate God. But who am I to judge?

Why forty days though? Forty is an important number in the Bible. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness between the time they fled captivity in Egypt to the time they entered the Promise Land. During those forty years, they learned how to trust God to provide for their needs. That’s also where they received the Law of Moses which helped them understand how to relate to God and to one another. The scripture Barbara read is about the 40 *days* that Jesus spent in the wilderness after he was baptized and before he started his public ministry. Notice how both of these events took place in the wilderness. Now we’ve got the Boy Scouts here with us this morning and they’re quite accustomed to spending time in the wilderness. I know that some of our scouts have participated in the Philmont trek which is a seven-day hike out of New Mexico. Now ... can you imagine doing a 40-day wilderness camp? And can you imagine doing it by *yourself*?

That's what today's scripture is about. After Jesus was baptized and received the Holy Spirit, the Spirit led him to the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He was tempted to choose between two pathways: The pathway to opposition and execution or the pathway to popularity, power and prestige. What you've got to be careful with as you study this passage is writing it off as a cliched little morality lesson like, "Jesus resisted temptation and so should you." I mean, we could do that, and we wouldn't be wrong. But I'm also saying that there's a whole lot more here than *just* that lesson.

Jesus' time in the wilderness was a time of preparation. It was a time of trial. It was a time where Jesus wrestled with his identity. He was called "Son of God" at his baptism, but what does that mean? What kind of "Son of God" is he going to be? Also, this wasn't some battle against the cosmic forces of evil. This isn't "Jesus versus Satan" and wondering who's going to win. This is Jesus learning about who he is. Yeah, but the passage clearly says, "he was tempted by the devil." Yes, this is true. But what you couldn't see because Barbara read it is that "the devil" is not capitalized in this text. Nor is the name "Satan" mentioned. In other words, the devil in this story is not the personification and emblem of evil. This is "diablos" which means "accuser" or "tempter." Unfortunately, we're all familiar with diablos, or I guess "diabloi" would be the plural. You ever wake up in the morning and before you even get out of bed and have your morning coffee, you hear this voice in your head that says, "So how are you going to screw things up today? How are you going to fool people into believing that you're competent at anything other than pretending to be someone who you aren't? You faker." Good grief pastor, didn't you just say that giving up coffee for Lent could be a good thing? Listen, for some people that voice doesn't go away after coffee. Sometimes the diablos is the voice at the very end of the day that says, "You didn't finish everything on your list today. See? You are a faker and a loser."

As hard as this might be to reconcile, we've got to remember that it was the Spirit of God who led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. In the same way that the people of Israel were led out into the wilderness for 40 *years* to figure out what it means to be the people of God, this is Jesus being led out into the wilderness for 40 days to figure out what it means to be the Son of God. That's what happens in the wilderness. Our time in the wilderness is a time to figure out who we are and whose we are. And Scouts? Your leaders know this. Yes, the times you spend out in the wilderness hiking and camping can be fun, but it's also a time for you to figure out who you are and that what you learn from your wilderness experience will help you face the daily struggles you'll have for the rest of your adult lives. So, make sure you tell your scout leaders you appreciate them. And no, they did not pay me to say that.

The timing for this temptation in the wilderness was perfect. It was right *after* his baptism where God publicly declared, "You are my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." And it was right before he started his public ministry in his hometown synagogue. He made the people in his hometown synagogue so mad at him that they tried to throw him off a cliff. This time in the wilderness was necessary for Jesus to manage that kind of psychic whiplash.

So, let's talk about the three big temptations that Jesus faced because I feel like they are incredibly relevant and timely considering all the things that are going on in the world today. If we really want to break it down into the simplest terms, we could say that Jesus' three temptations were about Food, Power and Survival.

Temptation #1 - Jesus was fasting during his time in the wilderness, so when that time was over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, turn one of these stones into a loaf of bread." But Jesus said, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" This isn't just a conversation about food. It's about who and what sustains us. Scripture tells us that God will provide for our needs. When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he said, "Give us this day our daily

bread.” Some translators say, “Give us this day’s bread.” Not tomorrow’s. Not yesterday’s. This day’s bread. God gives us enough of what we need. That’s why we observe the sabbath. God gives us so much that we can take a day to rest so we don’t have to grasp, hoard or compete for resources. There’s enough resources on this earth to sustain *everyone*. We humans don’t believe it though. We don’t think there’s enough and therefore we do not live like there is enough. So we find ways to hoard resources like the Israelite tried to hoard mana during their wilderness experience. Or how we hoarded toilet paper during our pandemic experience! We humans do awful things to others to make sure that we have more than enough. Jesus resists this temptation because he knows there is enough. He doesn’t need to magically make bread out of stones because he knows God will provide.

Temptation #2 - The devil led Jesus up to a high place and showed him all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said, “I’ll give you authority over all these places if you worship me.” Jesus said, “No, because it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.’” This temptation isn’t just about “political power” and how to get people to serve you. What this is about is remembering who we should serve. It’s about remembering who really matters. And who matters most are not all these kings and rulers who claim to be able to provide for you and protect you if you just follow them and keep them in power. The one who matters most is God and God alone. The one who provides is God and God alone. God’s power is not the same power that kings wield by brandishing their swords so they can receive glory.

Temptation #3 - Then the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, to the pinnacle of the Jewish temple. Then he said, “If you really are the Son of God, jump. After all, Psalm 91 says, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Then Jesus said, “Yes, and Deuteronomy 6 says, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Don’t you go trying to quote scripture to me diablo. I know it way better than you. So, how is this temptation related to “survival?” Why would any

ruler throw themselves from the pinnacle of the temple for the purpose of calling down an army of angels to protect them? One of the things we've been learning in Bible study is how badly Israel wanted to have a king so they could be like all the other nations. But God said, "You don't need a king. If you get a king you'll get all the problems that come along with having a king." And one of the biggest problems that goes with *being* a king is all the concessions and compromises you have to make with other nations just to ensure your own survival. Israel spent so much time and effort trying to be a player on the field of kings and kingdoms that they were knee deep in idolatry. And idolatry, in a nutshell, is letting other things become more important than God. Jesus didn't need to make compromises or concessions to anyone because he answered only to God. Jesus always put God first and therefore never had to worry about his survival.

Jesus was able to say "no" to all the temptations that the devil threw at him. Jesus didn't need to conjure up food because God provides. Jesus didn't need people to serve him for the sake of his own glory and power because he believed that only God deserved glory and power. Jesus didn't need to throw himself off a building to prove how much of a risk-taker he was or how he could bring down an army of angels to protect him. God provided everything he needed. But you know, it's funny because throughout Jesus' ministry, he made food to feed the hungry. He performed great deeds of power and risked everything even to the point of death. But when he did those things, it was always for the glory of God. Not his glory. God's glory. That's why I think the takeaway lesson here goes beyond, "Jesus resisted temptation and so should you." We as individuals and we as God's church are capable of accomplishing great things in ministry. Like Jesus, we have opportunities to feed and lead and serve. But we do not do it for our own glory, but rather God's glory. That is the kind of lesson we often learn in the wilderness, and that is why our Lenten journey begins in the wilderness. May the next 40 days be a time where we learn to trust in the God who provides for all our needs.