

First Sunday in Lent – March 9, 2025
Luke 4:1-13

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

On Wednesday we began the season of Lent, a time that we set aside in the church's calendar, for discernment – for self-examination as our Invitation to Lent put it. Lent is about paying attention to what is influencing us in our lives, what external pressures and temptations there are that are imposed on us from without, but also what internal forces are at work within us: our habits, our impulses, and our wants. Lent is an opportunity to take stock, and notice how all of these forces shape us into who we are, how they influence what kind of person we are. We pattern this season on Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness following his baptism, as attested by the first three Gospels, where he fasted and endured temptation by the devil, and then emerged to begin his earthly ministry of proclaiming the good news of God's saving activity in word and deed.

We also pattern this time on Jesus' wilderness fast recognizing that the devil's temptations inflicted on Jesus are our temptations too. And by that I don't mean just that we fall prey to the allure of power, wealth, status, and security, although we surely do. I mean that we often play the role of the devil with one another. We have embodied his world view and his tactics. And we don't even need to leave the Gospel of Luke to see that play out. Our reading today ends with this sentence: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." When do you suppose that opportune time was? The devil is mentioned only one more time in Luke, and it's in a parable that Jesus tells, not a story about the devil returning to tempt Jesus again. So is this a loose thread, then? Did Luke just forget about the devil coming back at an "opportune time"? Not if we read carefully. Do you remember where Jesus was again tempted to abandon his mission? You might think of when Peter tried to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem to be handed over to death. That's one example. You might think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking the Father to "take this cup away," to spare him from death. That's another example. But what about his crucifixion? Do you remember the soldiers offering him sour wine? Not unlike the devil's temptation to feed himself in our text today, maybe. But here's where I think it's obvious: the devil's temptations return in the words of the leaders, the soldiers, and one of the two who were crucified with him. "If you are the King of the Jews," if you are the Messiah, "save yourself!" Three times that temptation is spoken at Jesus' crucifixion. But no devil is mentioned there. None is needed. The same words trip easily off the tongues of those who crucified him, those who were crucified with him, and those who were just looking on. That's because these words of the devil are our words too. "Serve yourself!" we say to Jesus, "That's what *we* do whenever *we* get any kind of power. And you've got *lots* of power. You're the Son of God! So, go on, *use the power!*"

The devil's words are our words because we know how the world works. If you don't look out for yourself, no one else will. That's just the way it is. And like the sun rising in the east, we trust that it will always be so. Imagining that you can change the way the world works by extraordinary acts of piety, or by prayer, or faithfulness to God, is delusional at best, we think to ourselves, even if we might not say that in front of the pastor or our church friends. And why would you want to change things anyway? Things generally work out well for those who have power, especially those of us who are in the favored demographic.

Captivated by this devilish mindset, we attempt to use God – when we think about God at all – in the service of our own agendas. Jesus responds to all of the devil's temptations here with the words of scripture. But the devil also knows scripture. The difference is in how they use it.

“Go ahead, throw yourself off the top of the temple,” the devil says to Jesus. “God has promised that his angels will help you.” That’s today’s psalm that he’s quoting. The devil uses scripture in the service of our perceived self-interest, to keep the focus on ourselves and our desires. But Jesus’ use of scripture goes in the other direction, away from the self and toward God. “One does not live by bread alone,” Jesus says, but by the word of God. “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” And Jesus’ desire in the garden to be spared the pain of his trial and crucifixion he himself counters with “not my will, but yours be done.”

Jesus takes this approach all the way to his death. “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing,” he says from the cross, looking out not for his own interests, but for ours. Here God’s power is made known in weakness. Jesus endures his trial to save us from a trial that we would surely fail if not for him. God’s will, and not ours, is the only way to life. To be sure, it is a way that leads to death, but then also through death to resurrection. All other ways, those ways we so enthusiastically urged on Jesus and each other, end badly.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. We remembered that on Wednesday at the same time that we were marked with a cross of ash and reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. But at the same time, the Spirit we are sealed with gives us confidence in the promise of our baptism that we belong to Christ and share his life, and that faith and trust draw us out of our self-centered agendas and into God’s loving, self-giving agenda on behalf of the world that God loves. That is the kind of person that God is right now at work to form us into. So that then, trusting in the promise of our baptism, and fed and nourished by his body and blood, we can be led by the Spirit back into the world. The devil is still there, still up to his old tricks, still looking for an opportune time to come at us again with his enticing offers. Only now we see them for the deadly lies they are, and we parry the devil’s assaults with gospel of Jesus Christ. We live now not by bread alone but by the Word of God, and it is that bread of life we now urge upon the world.

Let us cling to that vision with perseverance and hope. And as we do the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.