

Lent 1C (2/14/2016)
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

Jesus passes the test, but he's the only one. Temptations divide our allegiance, pulling us away from God's promise and toward other fallacious promises. Yet, Jesus' faithfulness unto the cross is the means by which God makes good on God's promise to us, in spite of our unfaithfulness.

What a tantalizing Gospel! This famous story from Luke tempts us with any number of questions. First of all, could Jesus possibly survive a forty-day fast? If he is alone in the wilderness with only the Holy Spirit to accompany him through his ordeal with the devil, how does Luke hear about it?¹ Who, for that matter, is the devil? Is he a distinct figure walking the Earth, or a personification of evil for the sake of the story? Does the devil truly possess the kingdoms of the world as he claims, or is he lying? If Jesus is susceptible to temptation, then, in theory, could he sin? And, last but certainly not least, if even the devil can quote scripture for his purposes, whose interpretation can we really trust?²

I'm not going to address any of these questions in the sermon today, although I hope you think about them and seek out a conversation partner. You can talk to me if you'd like. Delving more deeply into Holy Scripture is a wonderful Lenten discipline. But these aforementioned elements of the story,

¹ See Sharon H. Ringe, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 45.

² See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 195.

fascinating as they may be, can distract from the heart of our Gospel for today: the affirmation that Jesus is faithful to the will of God in spite of attractive alternatives.

We usually think of temptation in terms of that which is alluring yet harmful, like junk food or addictive substances. When we desire something that's bad for us, that's temptation. But notice that the devil tempts Jesus with seemingly good things.³ Jesus is literally starving – what's wrong with conjuring up a few loaves of bread? The world is beleaguered by Roman imperial oppression – what's wrong with taking the political reins for the sake of the people's freedom? God has rescued God's Chosen in the past, and with God all things are possible – what's wrong with taking a leap of faith?

It's not that the devil tempts Jesus toward evil, but rather away from his true identity and purpose.⁴ Jesus is God's beloved Child whose singular charge is to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to the captives and the oppressed. His messianic work is vital for a world groaning under the weight of poverty, captivity, and oppression. But, he will not accomplish this work apart from God.

The devil's temptation is a work-around: "Forget God's claim on your life," he coaxes, "and make bread for yourself and as many hungry people as you like. Bow down to me, and I'll give you all the power you need to establish

³ Ringe 47.

⁴ See David J. Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/lent-1-c-identity-theft/>.

the society you want. And, if God really cares about you, the Bible says nothing can hurt you anyway, so you might as well make a show out of it.” But, as enticing as it might be to forfeit his fidelity to God, to take matters into his own hands, and to circumvent the way of the cross, Jesus resists. He exemplifies true faithfulness, in spite of temptation, and in spite of the ultimate cost.

Jesus passes the test, but he’s the only one. The fact is that Jesus is faithful to the will of God, but we’re not. We prefer the attractive alternatives. Self-sufficiency, status, security – these are the true temptations. They divide our allegiance, pulling us away from God’s promise and toward other fallacious promises. **You are a cherished child of God, forever held in the grace of God, and unconditionally welcome among the people of God.** But isn’t it tempting to believe that you can – and should – achieve success and satisfaction on your own? Isn’t it tempting to pursue artificial standards of beauty and worthiness? Isn’t it tempting to believe that you can overcome your sense of vulnerability by putting distance between yourself and unwanted others?

As we begin to study the Lord’s Prayer in more depth through our Lenten devotional and Wednesday evening prayer, I’m mindful of the first petition: *Your* kingdom come, *your* will be done, on Earth as in heaven. Before we pray for daily bread, before we pray for forgiveness, before we pray for

deliverance, we pray that God will bring about the reality God desires for the world, and draw us into it. Our first priority in prayer, in other words, is God's priority. The Lord's Prayer has become rote for many of us, but we need to pray it as often as we do in part to remember God's central place in our common life, even as we are baited by the alternatives.

Dear church, Jesus has not come to condemn us, so his heroic obedience, in contrast to our waywardness, should not cause us to lose hope. On the contrary, **Jesus' faithfulness unto the cross is the very means by which God makes good on God's promise to us, in spite of our unfaithfulness. We refuse God, yet God reaches out to us. No failure, no infidelity, no willful rejection can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Not even the cross can kill God's resolve to be reunited with us. The risen Christ comes to meet us in gracious words, in the kindness of friends and strangers, in bread and wine. And, living among us, he sustains our faith and inspires our love until the day that God's kingdom comes in its fullness, and God's will is finally done.**