

## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 4:1-13

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The story of Jesus' temptation is assigned out of chronological order in Luke's story because it is traditionally associated with Lent, with temptation, testing and Lenten disciplines. Not eating for forty days was Jesus' test. For people who undertake Lenten disciplines, sometimes it's not meat or giving up something that is of importance to them for the forty days of Lent. It is a time of prayer and spiritual discipline in some form.

Mark's version of the temptation of Jesus is very brief. Jesus was driven out into the wilderness for forty days where he was tested by Satan, with wild beasts, and ministered to by angels. Both Matthew and Luke have expanded stories of the temptation. The key word in them is the Greek word *peirazo* which means "to tempt or test." That word occurs in several places in the gospel tradition including the Lord's prayer: "Lead us not into the time of temptation," which also means the time of testing. This story is supremely the story of being tested by Satan.

The source of Jesus' power to resist Satan's temptations is directly related to knowing the scriptures by heart. In this time of supreme testing, it is what Jesus knows by heart from Deuteronomy that is his greatest source of strength in resisting temptation and passing the test. The most striking thing about Jesus is his spiritual strength, which comes from his mastery of Scripture.

In telling the story the most difficult character to depict is Satan. What kind of voice to give Satan will be your first major decision as the teller of this story. Is he seductive like a snake, oily like a used car salesman, a divine figure with a sense of authority but somewhat off? You might listen to audio readings of *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis to hear one dramatic interpretation of the voice of Satan.

I strongly encourage you to create a contrast between Satan's voice and Jesus' voice so that there is a discernable difference between the style of their speech. In all probability Jesus' voice is straight, clear, and strong. Satan's voice is full of possibilities and it might be that something like a certain breathless quality to his promises of all the things that are possible "if you but follow me."

The dynamic of the story is analogous to and reminiscent of the experience of Israel in the wilderness for forty years. Jesus is in the desert for forty days. It is not coincidental that the number forty is used here because it evokes the wilderness experience of Israel.

In the wilderness both Israel and Jesus are tempted to rebel against God and decide to no longer believe in or trust God. In Luke this is an apocalyptic battle with the powers of evil. Satan is the personification of the powers of evil and Jesus' testing is a battle against those spiritual powers.

The first temptation is the temptation to turn stones into bread. It comes after forty days of fasting. Jesus is very hungry. This, too, recalls the experience of Moses and the people in the wilderness. They didn't have enough to eat. They ran out of bread, so God sent them manna from heaven, bread from heaven. In this case there is no indication that Jesus gets any bread. He responds with a quotation from Deuteronomy (8:3): "Man (that is, human beings) shall not live by bread alone."

The second temptation is a temptation of power. Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offers them to Jesus if he will only worship him. This temptation of power is stated in the story in a strange way. Satan says that all these kingdoms have been given to him and he can do with them whatever he wants. This claim is strange on the one hand, because the Gospel affirms the power of the kingdom of God over the kingdoms of the world. On the other hand, it reflects the tradition that God has not determined the course of history and that it is fully possible for people to choose to follow Satan. And in Revelation, for example, Satan has control of the great cities of the world. Jesus' response is again to remember a line from Deuteronomy. It is a statement that one is to worship God alone. Jesus rejects the temptation to worship Satan for the sake of acquiring power.

In the third temptation, Satan has learned about the power of quotation of scripture from memory. He quotes Psalm 91 twice about how God would protect Jesus if he threw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple. The pinnacle of the temple was the top of the roof of the temple enclosure that overlook the Kidron Valley. That place on the Temple was built on top of a major cliff, and so from the top of the wall of the Temple to the Kidron Valley below was a long fall. It is probable that when James was executed they threw him off of that roof of the temple. A modern analogy would be falling from the Sears Tower or the Empire State building.

Jesus' temptation here is to use the power of God to do miracles that would be in his own self-interest. This in effect puts God to the test. The line from Deuteronomy that Jesus remembers is, "Don't put the Lord your God to the test."

Thus, the admonition from Deuteronomy is that, just as we pray that the Lord will not put us to the test, we also do not put God to the test. Jesus never forgot how hard this testing was as is reflected in his words to the disciples when they enter the garden of Gethsemane: "Pray that you may not enter into the time of testing." It is also one of the central prayers in the Lord's prayer: "Do not lead us into temptation"—the time of testing, that is.

This is a story of the contest between Satan and Jesus. This spiritual contest, this battle between the powers of good and evil, also happens in each person. It is one of the primary areas of focus for Lenten attention, as well as for the choices that we make on a daily basis. One prayer is that we may not be tested in the way that Jesus was. But if and when we are tested, a primary resource for us, as for Jesus, is our memory of the Scriptures, the Word of God.

In this case, Jesus passes the test and the end of the story identifies Satan's decision to withdraw until a more opportune time. In the story, the clearest instance of that more opportune time comes in Gethsemane when Jesus faced the imminence of death.. This story is an anticipation of what will follow later.