

**Critical Choices**  
**Luke 4:1-13**  
**Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, February 21, 2010**

A husband, unable to sleep, woke up his wife. "May I ask you a serious question honey?" "What's wrong dear?" He asked, "Is your love for me beyond temptation? Say Brad Pitt was trying to take you away from me, would you still love me?" His wife sat up with a dreamy look in her eyes and said, "Don't be silly, of course I'd still love you, and I'd miss you too!"

The wife's sly response reflects how ambiguous we become when facing temptation. "Of course I love you, and I'll miss you too," says tons about our good intentions and our sinful inclinations. Jesus put it best, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."

Fighting temptation is draining as you sense the growing tension in your body reflecting the intense turmoil within your soul and it doesn't stop until you either give in or finally overcome it.

Something to consider: Strangely enough temptation isn't necessarily a bad thing. Maybe a better word for temptation would be "test." Instead of being tempted to show how weak we are, we're tested to prove how strong we can be.

An architect designed a large warehouse with a flat roof constructed to withstand several hundred tons of ice and snow. To test his roof he piled on double that weight in sand and let it stay there for several weeks. A construction worker asked, "What are you trying to do, break your roof?" "Just the opposite," he replied, "I'm proving my roof will hold."

So temptation isn't God's way to break us but to prove we're strong enough to hold against any temptation that comes our way.

The traditional gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent tells the story of Jesus in the wilderness. The only way we could know this story is because Jesus himself told it to his disciples when he sensed they were struggling with similar issues and they, in turn, passed it on to help us realize since we share in the same humanity as Jesus we too are empowered to overcome temptation when we choose to do so.

Having said that, let's take a closer look at and draw strength from this story so we can be empowered to stand firm the next time we are tempted.

Luke reports Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

Keep in mind whenever you see the phrase 40 days or 40 years in the Bible it's a metaphor for a long season of preparation. For instance, God kept the Hebrews in the wilderness forty years to prepare them for the Promised Land. In a very real sense Jesus' forty days was also a necessary time of preparation. You see, even though Jesus was born to be the Christ he still had to decide what being the Christ really means. That's why Satan was hoping to tempt Jesus into becoming a compromised, counterfeit Christ. And you can be sure Satan tapped into every trick and illusion he could muster to break Jesus down.

Here's a question to ponder. When the tempter unexpectedly showed up could Jesus see him with his own two eyes or did Jesus simply experience the intense urge to give in the same way you and I do? I don't know and can only say it's open to interpretation. But I will say this: the power of evil is both real and slick. And I say slick because evil often masquerades in very attractive forms.

When I was a boy I had a Bible story book with memorable colored pictures. The picture for the story of Jesus' temptations impressed me particularly. The artist portrayed the devil in the form of a beautiful blue eyed, blond man bathed in a bright, shining light.

One of the key weapons in the Evil One's arsenal is the ability to deceive, to twist your perception of reality and make anything horrible and loathsome appear good and wonderful. So, armed with every trick in the book, Satan set out to first trick and then break Jesus.

"If you are God's Son, command these stones to be turned into bread."

"If you are God's Son," see how cunning the Tempter can be? He began by questioning Jesus' identity.

Learn from this because the same tactics are used against us. First you're tempted to wonder if you're worthy to call yourself a child of God. Even before the actual temptation, seeds of doubt and confusion are skillfully sown. You begin to question your foundational identity as a member of God's family leading you to doubt yourself. You wonder if God burdened you with impossibly high standards so why try becoming someone you'll never be? "Forget this silliness. Cut yourself a break. Look out for yourself. Turn these stones into bread, feed your appetites, if it feels good, do it. Stop saying "no" to yourself. Just for once do what you want."

“Turn these stones into bread.” More than tempting Jesus to break his fast, ironically Satan was tempting Jesus to use his powers for good. “Feed yourself, feed the hungry, wipe out poverty and misery. Be the Messiah who’ll be loved and remembered for his generosity and good will.”

But Jesus wouldn’t break. “Man does not live by bread alone.” Jesus chose not to be a Messiah who’d solve the world’s problems, but the Messiah who’d save the world from Satan’s grasp. It must have been tempting to become the world’s ATM machine, effortlessly passing out bread to the adoring masses instead of becoming the Messiah who chose the way of the cross.

The second temptation was equally insidious. Showing Jesus in an instant all the glory and power of all the kingdoms of the world Satan said, “...all this glory... and...authority...has been given to me and I’ll give it to you...If you worship me.”

The devil lied. The kingdoms of the world weren’t his to give. God would never entrust Satan to be the world’s caretaker. And yet, what Jesus was offered was tempting: complete control over not only his own destiny but everybody else’s, a control freak’s dream come true. “Call all the shots, say ‘Jump’ and wait for the automatic answer ‘How high?’ Be the ultimate puppet master pulling everybody’s strings and always getting the results you demand.”

Again, Jesus resisted. “Worship only the Lord and serve him only.” Jesus wouldn’t sell his soul and instead chose to wield power by surrendering power, instead of taking always giving, never putting himself first, but always content to be last. Jesus saw through Satan’s lies and distortions realizing gaining control and keeping power is a fleeting illusion. Only love conquers all and lasting power is only grounded in sacrifice. Jesus chose to rule over the Kingdom not of this world.

Unperturbed Satan tried one more time. Taking Jesus to the top of the temple he urged Jesus to jump to the court yard below, which was always crowded with pilgrims, promising at the last minute angels from heaven would rush in and lower him to a safe and easy landing.

What a sensation it would cause! The perfect publicity stunt! Jesus of Nazareth would become Jesus Christ Super Star surrounded by adoring fans. Instant ego gratification by becoming the center of attention.

Another devious temptation. Instead of working himself to death to build a reputation through preaching, teaching and healing in every back water village, become instantly famous in the big city. The rich and glamorous will wine and dine you. No rubbing shoulders with lepers, beggars and whores, only the beautiful people who’ll stand in line to rub shoulders with you.

For a third time Jesus resisted. He'd not let his ego needs divert him from his true calling, not to stand apart from humanity but to be one with humanity, for only then could Jesus be one of us.

In his attempt to break Jesus the devil cleverly assaulted three distinct and vulnerable components of our humanity: our need for absolute security ("Turn these stones into bread.") our need to be in total control ("All this I will give you if you bow down and worship me.") and our enormous ego needs ("...throw yourself down from here...He will command his angels to protect you...you will not dash your foot against a stone.").

Like Jesus, God empowers us to resist all assaults on our security, control and ego needs. Unlike Jesus, we often give into temptation usually with disastrous results.

Thank God Jesus refused to break and thank God even when we do, Jesus' resistance empowered him to go to the cross where his broken body and shed blood wiped out the consequences of our breaking under pressure.

Our forty days in the wilderness, our forty days of preparation has begun. Spend this time wisely, fast and pray, love and serve all in the name of Jesus who for our sakes and our salvation resisted temptation and passed the test to cover the times we don't.