
Why Was Jesus Led Into Temptation?

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
The First Sunday in Lent – Year B**

A voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.
He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts;
and the angels waited on him.*

Mark 1:11-13

Today is the First Sunday of Lent, a season of meditation and preparation for the Feast of Easter; and—as always—the gospel assigned for today recounts the encounter of Jesus in the wilderness with the devil, and with temptation.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell this story – but none of the gospel writers was actually there. It was only Jesus and the devil – “diabolos” they called him. No other witnesses, except the empty wilderness.

What exactly happened out there, I don’t know, though I have heard hundreds of explanations; and I myself have offered plenty of interpretations. In fact, most of us have our own ideas about what temptation is. Even Mae West –the great theologian (!?) but probably more known for her ways with men—had an opinion on it. She said, “I generally avoid temptation, unless I can’t resist it.”

This morning, my questions are these: What is temptation? And why, oh why, does the Spirit actually lead Jesus into the wilderness so that he can be tempted? The gospel writers disagree on a few of the details, but the general gist is the same: It was the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, with whom Jesus had just been baptized, it was the Holy Spirit, who led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted! Today’s gospel writer, Mark, says that the Spirit *drove* Jesus into the wilderness!

And, yet, it would be Jesus who later taught his disciples to pray like this: “Lead us *not* into temptation.” Surely most of us recognize that line. It’s from the Lord’s Prayer: “Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil.”

Maybe an opposite of Mae West, the great feminist Rita Mae Brown, rather agrees with some of this sentiment. She says, “Lead me not into temptation; I can find the way myself.”

No matter how we might make light of temptation, we also ask, “How can Jesus teach us to pray like that, and yet also let himself be led, into temptation?” No matter what other explanation we have of other details, we still have this startling truth: Jesus was led into temptation.

There, in the wilderness, the devil challenges Jesus. Matthew and Luke describe particular temptations: “*If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.*” “*All this glory and authority I will give you, if you will worship me.*” “*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.*” Jesus finally responds, “It is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

I like the developed exchanges between Jesus and Satan, because they sound like two wise Jewish rabbis debating each other, or two biblical scholars debating each other, or maybe even two friends debating each other. Or maybe this deep story of Jesus in the wilderness occurs within the interior soul of Jesus by himself.

In Mark's very simple version of Jesus in the wilderness, the connection between the baptism of Jesus and temptation of Jesus is stark and sudden and clear. It is immediately, immediately, after the voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the beloved," that "... immediately the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness."

Thus, I believe that, ultimately, temptation is anything that urges you to be false to yourself. The word "devil," is "diabolos" in the Greek, which means "to accuse." In fact, it originally means something like separation. The meaning of "diabolo," "devil" is "to separate from." Surely the devil seeks to separate us from God. But, in an equally powerful way, a devil is someone, or something, that seeks to separate us from our true selves.

The devil is asking Jesus to question his true self: "*If* you are the Son of God, do this. *If* you really are the Son of God, do that." The devil was asking Jesus to question himself. Are you really who you are? Jesus was led into temptation in order to confirm who he truly was.

For Jesus, and for us, the ultimate temptation is to doubt who you are.

Yes, the Lord's Prayer leads us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." How can Jesus teach us to pray that when he himself was led into temptation? Well, my answer is this: the Lord's Prayer is like a psalm, like a psalm prayer. In the psalms, we pray without filters. We pray emotionally, earnestly, that we not have to enter troublesome situations, that we not be put to shame. We do not want to grieve, or to suffer, or to be in pain. We do not want to question ourselves, or to be led into temptation. In the Lord's Prayer, I believe Jesus is acting like a psalmist: Jesus is teaching us to be honest in our prayer. Be emotionally honest. "Lead us not, oh please do not lead us, into temptation."

But the Spirit of God does lead us into wilderness places, where we are indeed tempted. The word is "tested," really; we are tested, like iron is tested and tempered and thus made even stronger. The Spirit will lead Jesus again to tests; in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prays, "Father, ...remove this cup from me!" The Spirit leads him to suffering.

And, in our lives, the Spirit of God leads us to places where we question ourselves, when we question who we are, when we question our identity. We are tempted to consider all sorts of possibilities. Those temptations, whether about bread or exploitation or worship, whether about money or sex or power, are ultimately about one thing, and one thing only: being untrue to our true selves.

God wants us to be true to ourselves. And the way to know who we are is allow ourselves to be tempted, to be tested, to be refined, through the age-old process of self-reflection and self-analysis, and God-reflection and God-analysis.

The great Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, said "The biggest human temptation is to settle for too little." To settle for too little. God deliver us from settling for anything less than who our true selves are. The greatest temptation is to conform to a world, or to a set of expectations, that is not who we are.

So, I leave us this morning with two more quotations from the feminist, Rita Mae Brown, She said, "The reward for conformity is that everyone likes you except yourself." (She reminds me of St. Paul there, who said, "Do not be conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2)).

But the better line from Rita Mae Brown is this: "I finally figured out the only reason to be alive is to enjoy it."

Let's be alive this Lent, as Jesus was alive. Not alive to desires which tempt us away from who we truly are. Let us be alive to our true selves.

In Lent, it will take prayer and self-denial. Remember: self-denial really means denial of our false selves. It will take self-reflection and God-reflection. We will have days of wilderness. But we will learn who our true self is. We will learn how to be alive to our true self. And on Easter morning, it will be our true self who rises, with Jesus Christ our Lord!

AMEN.

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