

Sermon Transcript

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

3.9.25 - The First Sunday of Lent

Our Gospel story tells us about Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, being tempted, or tested, by the devil. Jesus passes all the tests, and goes on to start his active ministry.

The first test is hunger. Jesus has been on his forty day retreat without eating, and the devil tells him he should use his divine powers to make some food already. Aren't you the Son of God?, the devil asks. Why not just make some bread?

Jesus answers by quoting God's law, God's instruction, from the book of Deuteronomy. The full quote is, One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God.

Ok, one point for Jesus.

The devil goes one better. All the kingdoms of the world will be yours, says the devil, if you will worship me. Because they are mine. Yeah, that's right.

Maybe the devil thinks that Jesus' mind is a little cloudy from all the fasting and praying and exposure to the elements. Could Jesus really be fooled into thinking that the devil is in charge and not God, that the devil would really give over authority to Jesus? Maybe the devil is figuring that Jesus' humanity, his human-ness, would succumb to this test. Because I think you and I fall for this one all the time! But more about that later.

In any case, Jesus again quotes from the book of Deuteronomy. Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.

Point number two, Jesus.

The devil brings out the big guns at this point and quotes scripture back at Jesus. The scripture the devil chooses is Psalm 91, a psalm promising protection for those who trust in God. It's a comforting psalm that is often a go-to for people facing hard times, made into the popular hymn On Eagles' Wings, which has nothing to do with football. Throw yourself off this high place, the devil says, because this scripture says God will rescue you!

Jesus sees through this test also, because Jesus understands the concept of considering the genre of the text in interpreting scripture. Jesus understands that the psalms are songs, prayers to God, by people. They express our emotions, our relationship with God, our hopes and fears. They are not God's law. They do not carry the same weight as God's word spoken through Moses in the book of Deuteronomy.

Jesus brings out the Deuteronomy again, saying to the devil, Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

Point three, Jesus. Fly, Jesus, fly!

Jesus has won the superbowl of tests by the devil. He has proved himself to be the Son of God.

We who know the rest of the story are not surprised that Jesus passes his tests. But it's worth asking, what has Jesus actually done? What do these tests mean?

It seems obvious that if Jesus had bowed down to the devil in test number two, that would have been bad news not just for Jesus, but for all of us. It would have been game over for God's experiment of becoming human if Jesus had followed the promise of easy power and glory by bowing to the devil.

Luckily Jesus the human was also a good Jew who had studied scripture, and leaned on it to resist this temptation. Luckily he understood that tempters and false gods will always try to sell you an easy way that is a total lie. Luckily he chose to double down on God his Father.

So test number two is critical and seems clear as to what was at stake.

But what would have been so bad if Jesus had made himself some bread, or had done a swan dive onto the Temple? Well yes, he would have broken his fast. But these could have been his first miracles, right? Why wait?

The thing is, if Jesus had listened to any of the devil's temptations and gone for it, he would have made it all about him. All about Jesus' divine power to make bread, for himself. About Jesus' ability to rule the world, himself. About Jesus' ability to save, to save himself.

Jesus will instead go on to use all these same powers, for others. He will make bread to feed a crowd, bread that he is still making today, that we will share in a little bit. He will offer all of us a kingdom that is here for us, if we are able to keep saying no to the devils and caesars and other fake gods of our time. He himself will choose to follow God instead of the devil, he will follow God all the way to the cross, all the way to suffering and death. And God will indeed raise Jesus up, showing all of us that death never has the last word in God's kingdom.

Jesus passes all of the devil's tests, he resists all of the temptations, he says no to his own comfort and power and avoiding the hard path that God has set for him, and because of this, we are all fed, we are all saved, we are all given a glimpse into God's kingdom.

In this Lent time, we are asked to confront these same tests and make the same choices. No, we are not Jesus, but Lent calls us to walk for just a little while with Jesus, to be a little more like Jesus. In this current wilderness time, this time we are in, the tests are right there before us.

It's a little like the COVID times we lived through just a few short years ago, when we could suddenly see that all of us were totally dependent on people doing work that had been mostly invisible and underappreciated and underpaid, and we should be lifting up those people and valuing them more. We could suddenly see in a dramatic way that we needed to care about the health of some people in a village far away, because our own health depended on it. Some of us could suddenly realize that racism was still very much a thing, because we had time on our hands to watch the disturbing video footage.

Our COVID wilderness showed us our interconnectedness, our dependence on each other. And aren't we seeing that again now, that government workers some of us thought of as wasteful, or maybe we just didn't think about them much at all, could be essential to us in guarding our nuclear secrets or keeping our planes in the air? Aren't we realizing one more time, that helping another country with hunger or fighting off an invasion, isn't generosity we can't afford and isn't even just a nice do-gooder thing to do, but it helps our own farmers and factory workers and the economy we all depend on? I think we might be seeing some of these things. I hope we are.

But I know that just like during COVID, there are a lot of temptations in our present wilderness. I was just as inclined as the next person during COVID to hunker down and hoard toilet paper, or doom scroll on Facebook rather than trying to do something constructive. I spent much of that lockdown time in an internal fight between wanting to get out there and help, and wanting to stay

home and protect others and my family, and I was pretty sure I never got it quite right. As things eased up I was just as inclined as the next person to forget about all that had been revealed and just get back to my “regular” life.

And the tempters, the false gods that we had in COVID times, well they are still pretty much the same now. I’m not talking about the person in the White House. I’m not even talking about the rich guys like Bezos or Musk or Zuckerberg, because it’s really more about the things those rich guys are running and how we participate in them despite ourselves. We know that there was a call for us to fast from buying stuff for just a day, and it didn’t seem like lots of us were able to do that, so we know, I know for myself personally, we are in the clutches of tempters and false gods selling us on power and wealth if we just keep participating. Whether it’s buying stuff for comfort or status or staying informed or even trying to shout from the social media mountaintop about our own righteous beliefs, we can’t seem to get away from the caesars of our own day.

The tests of our own wilderness time are just as hard as what Jesus faced. And we are not divine like Jesus. But Jesus has shown us a different way, a life-giving way. A way to resurrection.

If we can be a little less about getting our own bread, or eggs, in these times, if we can worry a little less about what will happen to us if we stand up for trans athletes, if we can in fact care a little less about being “right” or convincing someone of our point of view and work more about doing the work, sharing our bread and our power and our safety, we will get a glimpse of that kingdom Jesus shows us. If I can understand, even some of the time, that my work, my ministry, my life, is not about me, if we can all understand that it is about us, we will all be fed, we will see the resurrection. Amen.