

Grace Lutheran Church
March 6, 2022 + First Sunday of Lent
Luke 4:1-13 + Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?

The answer is yes - we all have trials and temptations. And none more severe than what Jesus endured at the very beginning of his ministry - his first four and a half weeks on the job. These are often called Jesus' "temptations," but the translation "testing" is a closer to the original. For 40 days Jesus was tested by the devil, not tempted. This is important because it allows every one of us to link our experience with Jesus' -- we have all been tested, more about that in a minute -- whereas when we think of temptations what comes to mind is more on the order of chocolate or ice cream. For our family, it's the double whammy of Jeni's dark chocolate ice cream, which we just discovered is carried in stores here.

What else do we have in common with Jesus' experience of being tested by the devil? Our baptism. Jesus' own baptism right before today's scene sets this up: He had just emerged from the waters of the Jordan where he was baptized by John. Immediately, the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, where he encountered the devil. He was tested because of his baptism. Luke 4:3 actually says "SINCE you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." There at the Jordan God had declared him his beloved Son in whom he was well pleased. The devil, who apparently was right there listening in, heard this as a battle cry, and decided to try to bring Jesus down at the first opportunity.

And so it is with us: Because in our baptism we are called to serve God and God alone, the devil heard that as a battle cry right from the get-go. In other words, because of our baptism, our faith will always be tested and Satan is always behind that testing. For he does not fight to get back what he has not lost.

And it is not one and done if we if we prevail at any one of these tests. The devil will keep trying. If you look at the span of Jesus' life and ministry, you'll see that his own faith was tested right up to the end. In Gethsemane he prays that the cup of suffering may be taken from him, and on the cross he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Hebrews 4:15 makes our connection with Jesus' testing explicit: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are," adding, "yet without sin."

What also links our experience with Jesus' is that his tests were embodied -- not just spiritual trials but bodily cravings that we can identify with.

First was the test of hunger. At the end of his 40-day fast Jesus was ravenously, desperately hungry. The devil offered him quick relief from this gnawing pain: For a single command, you can turn this stone into a loaf of bread. *What is the deep and gnawing hunger that we try to satisfy through quick fixes?*

Then was the test of power: Jesus was the Son of God but he was human as well, and in this state weakened by hunger he may have been filled with doubts and deep fears of what lay ahead. Did he

know then that, to sit at God's right hand for eternity in glory and power, he would have to die? How much easier to say yes to the devil's quick, painless offer of power. *How does the promise of power ensnare us in schemes that take us away from God?*

Finally was the test of personal safety. Did Jesus know what physical suffering lay ahead? Here, the devil is offering him a blanket health insurance policy of angelic protection, saying that they will bear you up so that you will not even dash your foot against stone. *How do we try to protect ourselves when in fact we are only hurting others, just as if Jesus had given in to this test, the world would have been lost forever?*

We have all endured various forms of testing across the span of our lives, trials that cause us to reach deeply into our soul and confront for the very ground of our faith in overcoming challenges that might otherwise sink us. The devil and his demons are always at work on us. It helps when you name your enemy, so here are a few of those demons:

- There is the demon of discouragement, who tests our conviction in the midst of severe setbacks or devastating losses that God IS our rock and refuge, and that Jesus IS always with us.
- There is the demon of disappointment, who exploits the sin of pride as we set our sights too high so that, when we fail to reach those markers, we wrongly blame our own abilities.
- There is the demon of drink, or we could say, any addictive substance, who compels us to seek relief from anxiety and stress in ways that only distance us from God.
- And most insidious of all, there is the demon of dread, who plays cruelly on our instinct to cower in fear before things we don't understand. The kneejerk response of fear keeps us from seeking facts so that we can be well informed about the clear and present dangers that we are actually facing -- because the more you know about who or what is attacking you, the more effective your response can be.

What carries us through these tests? The promise that God is faithful. The promise of God's steadfast love and mercy. The promise that because of our baptism we belong to God. Remember the words from our Thanksgiving for Baptism? "By water and your Word you claim us as daughters and sons, making us heirs of your promise." (And by the way this is why we have liturgical worship, so that timeless texts such as these will pop into your mind when you need them.) Because of our baptism, our response to Satan is this: "SINCE I am a child of God, that promise of God's steadfast mercy and love belongs to me, and you are powerless to against it."

This line from the Thanksgiving for Baptism also tells us where to go for help in the midst of our testing--not only to God but to scripture: "By water and your Word you claim us as daughters and sons." In our Sunday morning Bible study between services during Lent we are discovering in the psalms words of hope and encouragement from people who lived more than 2,000 years ago but whose testings mirror our own. There is always room for more--let me know if you'd like to join in person or by Zoom.

So yes, take it to the Lord in prayer, but bring with you those words of consolation and hope that the church has lovingly handed down to all Christian through the ages to have been handed down to all Christians as a sacred treasure.

Amen.