



Playing God + Luke 4:1-12
Lent 1, February 18, 2024
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On Ash Wednesday we heard the bare-bones version of Jesus' temptation in Mark. Today Luke elaborates on Mark in a way that draws us into the great psychic and spiritual struggle of that confrontation. Because what human being has not been tempted, in some dark recess of human frailty, to "play God" just as Satan was doing here?

"Playing God" generally refers to someone who uses power that would normally be reserved for God to make decisions about the way someone lives. Exerting control over them to persuade, tempt, or force them into actions that are not consistent with God's purposes. Interfering with their right to exercise the free will God gave them.

This is a more subtle use of the term, and one that is more useful to us in our lives, than the idea of "playing God" over whether a person lives or dies. As in what happened at Memorial Hospital in New Orleans when in the midst of chaos hospital administrators abandoned some patients to die because they were judged not fit for survival. The phrase can also be applied in this way to the wartime or emergency practice of triage, a French word that originally referred to the practice of separating different varieties of coffee beans from a jumbled batch. Who gets to be or rescued or treated and who doesn't? Pray that you will not fall into this time of trial.

But the playing God that we encounter today is something we can connect with in our own lives. Let's take a closer look at Satan's game plan.

After Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit led Jesus around in the wilderness – around in it, not into it, since he was already there as this slide of his supposed baptism site shows – in an ordeal recalling the Israelites' 40-day journey in the desert. Why was this an opportune time for Satan to show up? Because Jesus had just emerged from his baptism bathed in the affirmation of his Father: "This is my beloved Son!" It could have been that his guard was momentarily down.

Brand new to ministry, Jesus may not have realized what was happening at first, but the devil definitely recognizes Jesus as the greatest challenge to his authority that he would ever come up against. What better time to undermine Jesus' ministry than in the glow of what Jesus had just experienced? Now, I have to think that deep down Satan knew the way it would go, all the way to the bitter end when he is finally defeated in Revelation. But drunk on his own power, perhaps he decided that if he brought all his craftiness to bear here, maybe he could change history.

The devil gets off to a smart start with a temptation involving food, since at that point Jesus was on the brink of starvation -- note that these temptations come at the end of Jesus' 40 days. Satan doesn't dispute who Jesus is, but tries to get him to exploit this status, undermine his loyalty to his Father, and betray his trust that God would supply all his needs. If Jesus gives in, that would do the trick because Jesus would be exercising a power that is apart from God.

No such luck. Jesus responds with the same answer Moses gave the Israelites to shore up their faith in the wilderness of Sinai – "One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes

from the mouth of the Lord.” In a beautiful expression of his humanity, Jesus does not deny his hunger but identifies instead with all who are starving for spiritual nourishment and who trust in God to provide. The upshot: Strike One for Satan.

Then Satan spreads before Jesus a vision of all the kingdoms of the world. Perhaps this is an inside joke for Luke, because at the time “all the kingdoms” meant those in the Roman empire under the hated Roman rule, which makes it fitting that the devil believes he is in charge of them.

But note the exchange Satan is proposing. His authority is false because God is the ruler of all things and Jesus is the one whom God has anointed to preside over them. Nonetheless Satan tries to trade on his sham authority: “Just as this has been given to me, so I will pass it along to you.” He is trying to get Jesus to acknowledge Satan as his benefactor in place of God. Jesus again quotes from Deuteronomy, “The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear,” to reject the devil’s pretensions and affirm his unwavering trust in God Strike Two.

The last test in Jerusalem prefigures Jesus’s passion. Knowing Jesus will be high up on the cross, Satan tempts him to exercise the power that could save him from death by quoting Psalm 91 to trick him into thinking that the same angels who had been waiting on him during those 40 days would save his life.

His use of Psalm 91 is the cleverest ploy of all. As we know from one of our most-loved hymns, the psalm is addressed to “You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shelter of the Almighty.” In quoting it, the devil is therefore pretending to speak in God’s own voice. Of course Jesus does not fall for it. Focused solely on his own power, Satan is a notoriously unreliable character. His belief that he is lord over all the real estate in the world is evidence alone of his delusional mindset. His purpose is to worship himself and swear by his own name alone.

Because of this, his effort to recruit Jesus to participate in a test of the promises of Psalm 91 fails miserably, because he forgets that the psalm is addressed to those who, through their faithfulness, reside in the shelter of God’s presence. Jesus minces no words in telling him this. Strike Three.

I began by talking of the ways in which we are tempted through our human frailty. Who among us, under pressure or in discouragement, has not wavered in our trust that God will supply all our needs? Who has not been deluded that empires, or territories, or provinces, or even households are under our authority? I try to catch myself whenever I’m talking about Grace Lutheran and I am tempted to say, “MY church....” And who has not fallen prey to people of a delusional mindset who, convinced they are God, make outlandish claims about how they can save us – only for us to realize, hopefully not too late, that their only concern is for themselves?

Here in Luke, Satan has struck out, but we are only in the middle innings of the great drama of the unfolding of God’s kingdom. The devil will return again and again at opportune times, both throughout Jesus’ ministry and throughout our lives. Be well prepared when these come to stand fearlessly before him and quote Holy Scripture just like Jesus did. And if you only have time for one word, Martin Luther tells us what that is: “One little word subdues him.” Stand firm, and eventually the jumbotron will be flashing big red letters in Satan’s eyes: GAME OVER.