

Luke 4:1-13

Seeking the truth

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This first Sunday in Lent our focus is on the temptation of Jesus. The forty days of Lent match the forty days that Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness. They also point back to the forty days that Moses fasted on Mt Sinai while receiving the covenant God made with Israel. They also reflect the forty years that Israel wandered in the wilderness before entering the promised land. Even the wilderness location is important. The wilderness was the place where God met with his people after redeeming them from slavery in Egypt. It was in the wilderness that God shaped them into his covenant people and led them with the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. It was in the wilderness that the people of Israel had to rely on God's providence to survive.

We might look at the temptation of Jesus and just contemplate our lack of ability to resist temptation, but it's about much more than just not sinning. This passage is part of the introduction to Jesus' ministry. Chapter three was John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus, and then at Jesus' baptism the voice from heaven declared, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Even in the first two chapters of Luke, Jesus' identity is affirmed by Mary, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna. There was really no reason to doubt that Jesus was the promised Messiah sent by God. Chapter three of Luke also ends with the genealogy that traces Jesus all the way back to Adam. He is the new Adam sent by God to undo the fall into sin of the first Adam.

So then, chapter four of Luke really serves as a testimony to Jesus' mission in this world. In one sense, the devil is simply a tool being used to proclaim the truth about who Jesus is and why he is here. Notice that it's the Holy Spirit that leads Jesus from the Jordan river into the wilderness. The devil didn't drag him away and try to get him to disobey the Father. The Spirit led him there to add a further affirmation to the words God spoke at his baptism.

If we look at the devil's three temptations, they all form an alternative mission and destiny that detracts from why the Messiah was sent in the first place. In the first temptation, the devil tells Jesus to command a stone to become a loaf of bread. Jesus is tempted to use his divine authority for personal gain. This is what the earthly emperors would do. They could demand grain be shipped to them from Egypt, and it would be. And if their words had power to transform stone into bread, they would do that too. But Jesus the Messiah came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

In the second temptation, the devil claims he can give Jesus glory and authority over all the kingdoms of the world. But Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. He says as much when standing before Pilate at the end of his earthly ministry. The Messiah came to usher people into a new heavenly kingdom.

In the third temptation, the devil attempts to get Jesus to put God to the test. He even quotes from scripture, from the psalm we read today, to convince Jesus that it's okay. But it is not okay, and Jesus the Messiah soundly rebukes the devil. The Messiah has come to follow the Father's will in the salvation of the world. "Not my will but your will be done", says Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane.

The temptations Jesus faced were all quite specific to his status as the Messiah. He is the Son of God, the promised Messiah, the saviour come to redeem God's people, and over and over again the devil tempts him to display this identity in self-serving ways that would actually undermine his very identity as the eternal Son of God. And if we read on in Luke's gospel account, the temptation story is followed by Jesus' announcement of the nature of his ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth. The temptation story basically shows what Jesus is not going to do in his ministry. The Nazareth synagogue sermon then gives us the positive: Jesus will bring "good news to the poor... release to the captives... recovery of sight to the blind... let the oppressed go free... and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19).

This is the nature of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus is bringing. It's not a kingdom of this world. It's not ruled by a self-serving dictator. The spirit led proclamation makes clear what this kingdom is and what this kingdom is not. Since we as Christians are called to continue the Spirit-led proclamation and enactment of God's kingdom, we are also tempted to abandon the task God has given us for ways of self-fulfilment, power, and spectacle.

Unlike Jesus, we will doubtlessly fail probably many times. This season of Lent is the time for confessing our failures and redirecting our steps to the way of Jesus. And through the power of the Spirit, we, too, can resist the temptations of the devil. It requires focusing again and again on the will God has for his church. And the place we find this is in God's Word, in the scriptures.

The temptation often comes in a form that sounds good. Just "Follow your heart", or "If it feels good it must be good". This is the same old lie of the devil. He can even use scripture to make it sound good. But we need to know God's truth. We need to know what actually is good. If the devil is happily quoting and distorting scripture to lead us astray, then we need to get the story straight.

We do very much live in a world of competing stories. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a prime example of competing stories. The stories that the Russian population get told are vastly different from what we see on our media, and different again from what people on the ground in Ukraine are seeing and experiencing. Finding the actual truth of the matter is quite challenging. But as Christians, we follow the one who is Truth. "I am the way, the truth, and the life", Jesus said.

In this world, we must know the true Christian story in order to resist the false stories that seek to take us captive. Rebuking the devil is as simple as speaking the truth of God's will and not accepting alternative missions as God's people. It's not easy. We won't always get it right. But we need to try. For the sake of those outside the kingdom of God, we need to proclaim the truth of God's will so that they may come in faith. And for the sake of those inside the kingdom of God, we need to proclaim the truth of God's will so that they are not led astray by falsehoods.

We need the Holy Spirit to lead us through all this, and so in this season of Lent, I encourage you to pray for the Holy Spirit to open your hearts and minds to the truth of God's will. As you read the scriptures, ask God to embed them within you, that you may carry God's truth with you wherever you go. Just like Israel in the desert with the cloud and the fire, God does lead his people. And just like the manna and the quail and the water from the rock, God does provide for his people. So, pray that God will provide for you and lead you, that with the help of the Holy Spirit you may be able to resist temptation, and to live out your identity as a redeemed and beloved child of God. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.