



“Bread and Stones”

a sermon by

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Luke 4:1-13

So far since celebrating the birth of Jesus we have followed his development through more than a few rites of passage. There was his circumcision, his confirmation in the temple, a 'coming of age' in Jerusalem at the Passover festival and, last week, his baptism. There is one final rite of passage that would serve to inaugurate his public ministry that we will cover before we take up different glimpses of his life and lessons - and that is our text for today; the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Coming to us from Luke 4:1-13. This narrative occurs just after his baptism, after he came up from the waters the Spirit descended on him like a dove, and a voice came down saying, 'This is my Son with whom I am well pleased.'

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

It often seems that God leaves us with more questions than answers. If God is just, then why do bad things happen to good people? If God is love, then why do so many hate in his name? If God is so great, then why is there so much suffering? In a society bred to seek solutions, the 'why' factor is particularly hardwired into our nature. And in a commodity-driven culture, we so often tend to approach our faith with a “Consumer Reports” mentality. ‘Well, Christianity ranked high in performance for the first 50,000 miles but then customer satisfaction dropped off because of reliability. Complaints rolled in that faith came at too high a cost. The help desk was slow.’ We tend to oscillate between a supercharged spirituality and running on fumes because things are either going fine, or we start to run in to those ‘whys.’ Why disease? Why death? Why earthquake? Why scandal? Why ‘Blackhawk down’ day, after day, after day? If God is so almighty, then why?

If the ‘whys’ were the question in the wilderness that day, then Satan was tempting Jesus with they ‘why not.’ ‘Ok, Son of God, time to do your stuff. We hear you are the most powerful new show in town, why not show them what you can do? You are hungry, and you are God - why not turn these stones to bread? You’ve been charged to rule the world, why not make all nations bow before you now? You will be brought up high in the world only to be pushed to your death - why not call upon God’s angels to save you? They will love you for it - and if you want them to love you, why not just do what it will take to make it be so?’ If you want them to believe, then why not make them believe? It will be a whole lot easier and you’ll never hear another ‘why’ again in your life.

They seem like simple enough suggestions. And besides, Jesus would do them all in the course of the next few years anyway - the people were hungry and he multiplied the loaves. He would become king of the Jews, he would resurrect Lazarus and be raised himself from the grave - what's the harm in doing a little demo for us now? And besides that, it wasn't just a demo that Satan was proposing. It was something much more powerful than that - something much more ... tempting. It was proof. Satan was offering Jesus the opportunity to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was who he said he was. That he was capable of the power that he claimed as the Son of the most high God. Satan was offering him the chance of a lifetime as only Satan does. To show the world once and for all who was Lord and ruler of all. To give us all irrefutable evidence of his lordship that would compel our belief, command our love that would give Jesus all of the joy of the ends he was sent to accomplish, with none of the suffering of the means. Satan offered him fame without sacrificing any flesh. It was the fast track to success, to power, to relationships, to solving the world's problems, to saving his own skin - is it any wonder our text says, 'he was tempted.' I should say so!

Jesus would become well acquainted with this temptation in his life. When he foretold his death and Peter unwittingly tempted him by responding 'let it not be so, Lord, this shall never happen to you!' Jesus shot back, 'Get behind me Satan,' rebuking him for having his mind on the things of this world. You can almost hear his anger - or is it his fear of the power of the temptation? When he hung on the cross, "the soldiers also mocked him ... saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" and the criminals hanging there with him were "Hurling abuse saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"¹ But instead of choosing a display of power to work the will of God, he chose to suffer and work his power in another way. In a way that means the poor will always be with us, and we will continue to be subject to the brokenness of the world. In a way that did not take away our pain, but promised instead to be with us in it. To redeem it from within in with a power that could only be exercised the hard way for it to be any good at all. The final rite of passage before his adult ministry and Satan plays to the most powerful vulnerabilities of most ministers of the gospel - he plays to his desire to succeed in his calling and to his profound compassion for the people. You could solve every problem, Jesus- why not?

I wonder if Satan was simply tempting Jesus to be the kind of Messiah that we want him to be.² That we believe we need him to be. Satan was offering Jesus the chance to resolve our 'whys' once and for all, to compel our belief and the belief of skeptics and those who would suffer and search for answers for centuries to come. This sounds pretty good to me and yet Jesus refused. He was offering Jesus the chance to be the kind of God we desire more often than not. The God who will just make all things right. Who will come down off of the cross and shock the world with his power by making all nations subject to him, by giving bread to the world, and saving us from death, but he resists. Professor Phillip Yancey sums it up well when he writes,

¹Luke 23:36-40

²Phillip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1995. Yancey has a great treatment of this topic, likening the power of a coercive love that promises to solve all problems to that of the Communist party in the Soviet Union, who promised to feed, clothe, and protect but at the cost of great freedom- a cost that would ultimately be too high for the country.

“My faith suffers from ... too many temptations to disbelieve. At times I want God to overwhelm me, to overcome my doubts with certainty, to give final proofs of his existence and his concern.”³ Pick up any newspaper or take a quiet look within and you might recognize a feeling like this of your own. The desire for God to compel our belief with a little proof of his power. I know that the desire lives in me. The desire for God to dispel the ‘whys’ and just make it all alright. To give himself and us the easy way out by behaving the way I want him to behave and showing the world what he is capable of.

It is not so difficult to see how, 2000 years ago and today, believers and tempters alike are still making the same requests of Jesus. Are hoping for anything but a suffering Messiah. Because anything would feel easier than a God who does not promise to save us from suffering. But no other God could save our souls and draw us to him. For God knows that giving us no choice but to believe is no choice and no belief at all. Any act of power can compel commitment, but only love can compel love. And Christ does not just seek our obedience, he seeks our hearts. He does not desire servitude or obligation, he desires relationship. And so instead of making the decision for us and telling us what we need, Christ comes to know us more intimately by taking the more difficult road of meeting us where we are in this world, and seeking transformation from within. Even if it means we would crucify him for it.

This temptation scene in the wilderness sets the stage for a ministry that would defy everything the world knew about God in order to teach it the true meaning of love. The kind of love that would set captives free by becoming one of them. Would redeem suffering by suffering himself and would defeat death only after being carried into his own tomb. Jesus resisted the temptation to use his power to fulfill his call to compel our belief and affection. Instead, he chose to use his love. It is as if he had said to Peter that day, ‘Don’t tempt me to take the easier way. I can do it. But I absolutely cannot, God help me. For if I do so, you will die a thousand deaths in exile from your God - whereas I am guaranteed a seat at his right hand no matter what. Help me to love you in this way - I know it hurts. It is the better way.’ God will not force our love with displays of power. He will not grab our arm and leave a bruise despite how badly he wants us to be in relationship with him. Instead, we are free to choose, free to deny. Free to doubt, free to wrestle, free to rage. Free to fall away and free to come back around to him in our own time. If only then we could just accept him in his. It was when the Centurion guard saw Jesus on the cross and the way the earth shook with grief over his death that he understood the nature of this great gift and was compelled to belief, “Surely this man was the Son of God.” We may never know the answers to why this life has to be so hard. But we do know how it will be redeemed. With the power of love. Amen.

³Ibid, p. 77.