

## If Temptation, Then Grace

(Luke 4:1-13)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
First Sunday in Lent, March 10, 2019

In the name of the one God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.

“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”<sup>1</sup>

“If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”<sup>2</sup>

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.”<sup>3</sup>

In this passage from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has recently been baptized and subsequently led by the Holy Spirit into a time in the wilderness. During this 40-day period we read of being harassed by “the devil” – the Gospel writer having substituted “devil” for the designation “Satan” that we find in the parallel passage in Mark’s Gospel. But regardless of the word used, the underlying situation is the same: Jesus has not journeyed into the wilderness alone; an adversary is there with him.

And the goal of this adversary is to undermine, and to exploit. Who Jesus is has already been made clear; it was God’s own voice that declared at the baptism, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”<sup>4</sup> By using these three “if ... then” types of statements, the adversary is “subtly trying to undermine the divine word at Jesus’ baptism.”<sup>5</sup> And through these attempts at undermining ... through these temptations to create bread out of stone so that a hunger will be satiated, to pledge loyalty in exchange for dominion over all, to jump off a high peak to prove that the angels will rescue him ... Jesus is being tempted to prove that his status was exactly that as God had stated, and to use that status for his own advantage.<sup>6</sup>

Lent is our own time of 40 days in the wilderness ... our time to reflect on our status as children of God and to consider the temptations that we face in our own lives. How many times do we experience moments when God’s declaration of and for us ... that we are God’s children ... is being questioned? How often might we sense that that small voice whispering in our ear, “If you do this, then this will be your reward?”

Think of those times when we discover that our own efforts on behalf of someone or something are suddenly corrupted or distorted by outside influences and taken in another

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:3 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:7 (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:9 (NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:22 (NRSV).

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Duck, “Luke 4:1-13: Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 1* (Kindle edition).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

direction. Consider those instances when we may have wanted to set aside a portion of time in our day to complete one important project or task ... only to discover at day's end that we have used that time for something completely different. What about the times in life when we could have taken our gifts and talents and used them to benefit someone else but instead let them lie dormant on the shelf?

That is one of the most powerful things about reflecting on Jesus' time in the wilderness: the realization that he faced temptations thrown up in his world that we still face today ... the temptations for self over others, for power over partnership. We live in a time in which the question "What would Jesus do?" is much more than a four letter acronym on wristbands; it is a question that demands our consideration.

If I had to guess, I would wager that each of us at one point or another in our lives wonders how Jesus would respond to the situations facing us if he were in our shoes. When we look at his time in the wilderness, at his time being pursued and harassed by an adversary looking to undercut God's promise for him ... and for us ... we are reminded once again that Jesus has in fact **already** walked in our shoes. As we hear in the words of the Eucharistic prayer, God sent Jesus to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us. And to live as one of us, he experienced the same temptations, the same potential for the corruption of all that is good, that we may each experience at one time or another ... in one form or another ... in our own lives.

But there is something else important that closely links our lives and experiences with Jesus' time in the wilderness. Recall that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for this time of trial ... and then rejoice in the fact that the Spirit did not abandon Jesus. Throughout those 40 days of wandering, hunger and temptation, whether we recognize it or not, the Spirit was **still there with him**. Through it all, it was there ... strengthening him and sustaining him. His faith and the power of the Spirit drove him to resist all of these temptations ... to arm himself with the word of God ... to be emboldened by his place as God's Son and make **that** his advantage in this struggle.

The same is true for each one of us. In the wilderness moments of our lives, we are **not** alone. The Spirit is with us. We are not led into moments, nor do we wander into them on our own, when we are simply abandoned. God **is** with us. The Spirit **strengthens** us. The example of Jesus **inspires** us. When we are tempted ... and we will be; when we stumble ... and we do; when we make mistakes ... and it is inevitable: in each instance, we are picked up. We are supported. And when we allow ourselves to be open to it, we receive God's grace ... time and time and time again.

The "if ... then" moments in our lives are all summarized in one: if we are human ... and we are .. then we can receive the grace and mercy of God ... and we will.

Amen.