

**February 14 2016 Year C First Sunday in Lent  
Scripture Lessons ~**

*Psalm 91*

*Luke 4:1-13*

**Sermon**

*Temptation*

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Whether one believes in a literal devil or not the story of Jesus and Satan may be instructive to our faith. And Luke tells the story. Jesus met Satan in the wilderness just as Jesus was beginning his life's work. Our reading for today reads "Jesus filled with the Spirit, was led into the wilderness."

I remind you that this episode with Jesus and Satan in the wilderness occurs immediately after Jesus baptism in the Jordan River. At his baptism, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove upon him and there is a voice saying, "This is my beloved Son." Don't you find it interesting that immediately after the descent of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is led into the wilderness?

Perhaps you thought that the gift of God's spirit led someone toward peace, satisfaction, joy, and good feeling. No, for Jesus, the gift of the Spirit led him into the wilderness. There, in the wilderness, far from the city, far from the support of others, and the comforts of civilization, Jesus is encountered by Satan. This suggests to me that people who receive the spirit ought to expect to be encountered by temptation.

There was a Marine Corps recruitment poster several years ago, maybe 30 or 40 years ago that said, under the picture of a boot camp private being yelled at by a drill instructor, the caption said, "We don't promise you a rose garden." Likewise, Jesus did not promise anyone that living a Christian life would be easy or without terrible temptations. Even Jesus was tempted to misuse his power and his authority.

In the wilderness, Satan makes Jesus a number of tempting offers. Satan does not attack Jesus, assault him or abuse him; rather he offers him gifts. And they are good gifts. Satan offers him bread. Jesus had been hungry for forty days, a very long time. What gift is more basic or necessary for life than bread? Most of us spend our days working for bread. Most human creativity is tied to economic productivity. We have lived through an incredibly affluent time in this last century for most North Americans. There has been a lot of bread.

What is Jesus' response to Satan's offer of bread? He refuses.

Satan then offers Jesus power. Satan tells him, if Jesus would just pay him appropriate homage, he can have power over all the kingdoms of this world. Satan feels he is in charge of such power. Such power could be a good thing. "Jesus, you can have the power to choose between good and evil in all the kingdoms of the world. All that power is yours. Satan says, "Jesus, you could have all the power to

do what you want to do, unopposed by the forces of evil.”In Jesus’ hands, power unopposed would surely have been used for good. Come to think of it, have you ever known anybody who said that he or she wanted power in order to do bad things? Leaders always claim they need power for noble things like ‘economic development’ or ‘national self-determination’ or ‘power to the people’ or ‘the liberation of women’ or ‘the reform of the church’ or some other noble objective.

We certainly live in a culture that values power; because, for most of us, because we have bread and enough to spare, we spend much of our time trying to get more power. We want power to live our lives as we please, to make the choices that we want to make. We admire people who have power and know how to use it. We have contempt for leaders who seem powerless. Satan offers Jesus all the power that one could want; all the power over every kingdom of the world.

And Jesus refuses. Jesus says, “NO!”

Perhaps now sensing the kind of person that Jesus is, Satan offers him religion. Satan having failed at bread and power, two commodities that are so self-evidently ambiguous and prone to abuse, Satan, then, offers him religion. “Throw yourself down from the tower and there will be spectacular religious results. Angels will catch you.”

There is a great deal of interest in our day of such spectacular religion, religion that works, and religion that “serves us.” We spend so much of our time trying to secure health and happiness through bread, or through political power, why not use religion in the same way? We have so many different paths to get what we want—hard work, therapy, the acquisition of stocks, and bonds, Why not religion? Isn’t religion a good thing? Would it not be a good thing to have so much faith that one could jump off a cliff, confident of divine protection?

And yet, even when faced with Satan’s offer for spiritual heroics, Jesus says, “NO!”

Don’t you find it interesting that Jesus is first known to us, in the Gospel of Luke, not by the things he affirms, or the actions he accomplishes, but rather by what he refuses? I remind you, this is the first time we have seen Jesus in action in Luke’s Gospel. This is the beginning. These are the first words we hear from Jesus as an adult. And this first word is “no”. No is a very small word, but “oh” how revealing. We usually want to know what a person believes in, rather than what that person doesn’t believe in. We are first of all most interested in what a person will do rather than what the person refuses to do. And yet, at the beginning, Jesus is known by what he rejects rather than what he affirms. Before Jesus preaches or lectures, he utters a simple little word, “No!”

Luke says that, after these three renunciations by Jesus, Satan slinks away and “waits for a more opportune time; for a more a more opportunity time. That sounds

ominous. When will that time be when Jesus again will be in the wilderness, hungry, alone, and vulnerable.

For now, here is an occasion for us to consider all that we know about Jesus on the basis of that which he renounces. In his three renunciations, Jesus is at odds with three of the most cherished possessions of his culture: money and possessions, power and religion. And more than that, Jesus is at odds with the entire disposition of our culture. Our favorite slogan is not, “no!” Our favorite slogans are things like, “Go for it!” or “You deserve it!” or “Yes”.

We believe in affirmation rather than renunciation. We think of ourselves not primarily as citizens or sisters or brothers, but we think of ourselves as consumers. If we want it, we have the duty to do everything possible to get. And if we can have it, we have a responsibility to take it. Don’t deny yourself. Learn to say, “Yes!”

We have all known young people who go into social work, haven’t we? They are giving of themselves to help others, yet our culture seems to think more of those who seek the almighty dollar than those who seek to live a life of service. Why is that? Our culture thinks more of those who say ‘yes’ rather than those who say ‘no’.

Thomas Jefferson was a great man, a great thinker, who knew in his heart the evil of American slavery. He spoke and wrote against slavery. Yet, until his death he could never bring himself to free his own slaves. He knew it was wrong, but he could not bring himself, for whatever reasons to say “no.”

Something in Jesus both repels and attracts us. We are frightened by one who is offered everything we love, all that we worship and are giving our lives for, and yet still renounce and refuse all of that. Still, you have to admit that there is something about him that also attracts us, even in his ability to renounces. And we, who are urged to follow Jesus by taking up his cross daily and following him, wonder what this means for us. It is surprising that the temptations which beset Jesus are the same as our temptations.

Satan offered Jesus the same commodities that we are offered. He was able to stand up to his full moral height and say “no.” Would we be strong enough to do the same? Satan is now waiting for a more ‘opportune time’ to assault Jesus with more temptations. We wonder when our ‘more opportune time’ will come.

I have a suggestion about that time. This story suggests that Satan’s ‘opportune time’ is that time when we are offered something that seems so right, so self-evidently good, that there is no need even to question its value. It will be something that 9 out of 10 average Americans think is good. Satan may even quote scripture to us just as he quoted scripture to Jesus. We will be tempted to say “yes’ to affirm all that is brightest and best within us. We may reach down, and not have

the resources to say anything but 'yes'. Later when we realize how much this decision has cost us, we will realize that this truly was Satan's opportune time."

Or, we may remember this story. While we may not be able to, like Jesus, have just the right verse of scripture on the tip of our tongue, why we may not be able to fully articulate the theological rationale for our decision, we will be able to offer one little word; that little word will be "no.". That little word will be enough.

In Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress in Our God," remember when it says, "The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him, one little word shall fell him"

I have always assumed the one little word so devastating and defeating to Satan was the word, was the name of 'Jesus'. Now I wonder if that little word that defeats Satan is even simpler; that little word, uttered in the name of Jesus, is "NO."

Let us pray:

Gracious Lord, the enticements of the world are alluring to us. It is difficult for us to say 'no'. , difficult even for us to know that there is something to which we ought to say 'no'.

Having so seldom denied ourselves, we often lack the skills of refusal. We grab at this or that bright enticement, fearing that we might miss the one possession that would give our lives meaning.

Strengthen our resolve, we pray. AMEN