

## Lent 1 C. March 10, 2019. Luke 4:1-13.

The great temptation we face when encountering this text (haha) is to trivialize Jesus' experience in the desert beyond all recognition. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of thinking that the devil suggested Jesus turn the stone into a case of Girl Scout cookies, when the Lord is supposed to be watching his waistline. That the offer of all the kingdoms of the world is the equivalent of seeing a twenty dollar bill drop unnoticed from a stranger's back pocket. That the proposal to jump off the Temple is the same as having the perfect withering comeback for the obnoxious and oblivious coworker.

I hope that we can resist this inclination to vacate the story of any real stakes—to make it more manageable and less threatening. We want to make it petty so that if we can't live up to the story, it's not that big of a deal. But the stakes in fact couldn't be higher. This story happens right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Luke has Jesus get baptized, then gives his genealogy, and then sends him out here to the desert. At the baptism, a voice from heaven declares Jesus to be the Son of God. And the genealogy argues that he is the promised Son of David who will restore Israel and the world. So the question that is being tested in this story is what it means to be these things. How is Jesus going to be as the Son of God? What kind of Messiah is he going to be? The question, fundamentally, is who Jesus is.

I want to suggest that the temptations aren't really about whether or not Jesus will do evil actions. They are about whether he will hold true to who he really is. The devil is offering him shortcuts. In a world where so many are hungry, think of what Jesus could do if he went about turning stones into bread. In a world with so much strife and oppression, imagine the Prince of Peace as the head of state in every country. And knowing that Jesus is facing execution, of course it's tempting to figure out in advance just how far God will go to keep him safe. Jesus will work miracles with bread, be declared the king of the heart of the world, and be brought by God back out of the grave. But he'll do none of them like this.

Jesus will feed thousands in the context of teaching and relationship. He'll seek to rule through example, love, and persuasion. And he will prove God's trustworthiness, not through a trick but by enduring the consequences of what he is called to do. The way of the Messiah is just that—it is a way, a path, a collection of habits, as much as it is a destination. Jesus is who is because of the how he does what he does, as much as because of what those spectacular results are.

We are supposed to be the people following along behind Jesus. Which means that for us, too, it matters not just whether we feed people, but how we do it. Even more pressingly these days, we work for a better world, but we do not use the tools of the wicked to build righteousness. Even when we're the good guys, we do not win at all costs. Only love can drive out hate, and so our means are always as important as our ends—even when the wickedness of our enemies is of startling proportions. And because

we would rather lose an argument than lie, because we would rather die than kill, we like Jesus must trust God to bring all right. And we must trust especially when the stakes are high, in situations we haven't been in before, without having already put God through a rehearsal.

A few days ago, Ash Wednesday called us to a time of self-examination. On this first Sunday in Lent, it's best phrased a little differently: a testing of self. The more dangerous temptation is not toward something salacious, but away from what we truly are. The devil tempts Jesus to be something other than himself, to take shortcuts to get the good things that he wants. The story asks us how we are tempted to be something less than what we are called to be, what shortcuts we've been eyeing up just to the side of the way of Jesus. Lent calls us to remember who we are; to remember whose we are, and to live true to that identity, given to us by God. This life is possible only by the trust in God that goes even through death. Amen.