

Never What's Expected
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I don't know if this is true for you, but it seems to me that Sunday mornings are particularly attractive times for sleeping. The bed just seems really cozy. All the dreams seem really wild and fun. When that alarm goes off, I am tempted to just hit snooze again, and again, and again—right up till about 11:00 or 11:30. I am also tempted to follow that heroic sleeping in with a big, egg laden breakfast and long cups of coffee while I watch that Sunday Morning program I hardly ever get to see, all bundled up in my bathrobe and sweatpants and slippers. I imagine many of us are tempted to skip work now and then, no matter how much we may love it. And make no mistake, I do love my job, and joining you all here on most of the Sundays throughout the year is one of the highlights of each of those weeks. But the temptation rears its head—if only fleetingly—when I hear that alarm on Sunday mornings.

I have heard that German people have an expression: *"time off is beyond price."* Now, like many other Europeans, German folks get something like eight weeks off a year. By contrast, most Americans get two weeks or so. So, for a lot of us in the states, the idea of more time off is very alluring, especially if it allowed us to sleep in for a change. On some level it is an obvious temptation, isn't it? And the obvious temptations are the easiest to deal with on some level, if only because we can see them clearly and name them. But the obvious temptations are not the only temptations. There are many different and more subtle levels to temptation, and the deepest and trickiest aspects of temptation are never what's expected.

And that is what makes the encounter between Jesus and Satan in today's gospel reading so fascinating to me. Lurking beneath the surface of the obvious temptations which Satan offers are more subtle, and even more consequential ones. When Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness he makes the choice to fast. This has been a typical choice in spiritual retreats through history. Fasting is an ancient tradition of spiritual cleansing. It is understood to help us to better perceive God's voice and presence in our lives. This is why certain types of fasts are called for during the season of Lent.

So, Satan shows up after Jesus has been fasting for forty days. That's forty days in a row—without Sundays off as we are now fortunate to receive during our own Lenten practices. Forty days without any food at all. Can you imagine? And Satan tests him by saying *"If you are the son of God"*—now, please notice Satan doesn't say *since* you are the son of God, but instead *"if"*--*"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."*¹ On the surface it seems like Satan is saying: "Come on, haven't you been fasting enough? Why not

¹ Luke 4:3b-c.

have a little snack? Why not just make a little bread for yourself, superstar? Forty days is long enough...”

The obvious temptation is for Jesus to feed himself despite being on an intentional fast. But, on more subtle levels, Satan is trying to get Jesus to mistrust himself and God. Satan questions Christ’s identity by saying *if you are the Son of God*, and then tries to get him to demonstrate his powers by making bread from a stone. It appears to be a no win situation for Jesus. On the one hand if Jesus is not the Son of God, he would be unable to make the stone into bread anyhow. But because Jesus is the Son of God, the underlying assumption of Satan’s statement suggests that a demonstration of power is in order, and perhaps even imperative to claiming that Holy identity. Fortunately for us, Jesus is a capable debater and Biblical thinker, and he twists the Devil’s logic against itself when he says “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”² Jesus references a passage from Deuteronomy, which concludes by saying “but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” So, Jesus claims his authority without following Satan’s suggestion, successfully reframing and redirecting their debate.

Satan’s response is to change the scene entirely. Through some sort of vision, Satan reveals all the kingdoms of the world to Jesus. Then he claims to have authority over everything and to be able to give it all to Christ. And all Jesus has to do to get it is to worship Satan. The obvious temptation is to receive worldly power, glory and authority. You see, Satan can’t even understand another kind of power than that which is usually on display among humans in the world—namely the power of the strong over the weak, and the haves over the have-nots. Satan cannot even begin to conceive of the power of God which lifts up the down trodden, heals the sick, and brings salvation to those in need.

There are also more subtle temptations here. Satan is encouraging Jesus to believe two lies. First, that Satan indeed has authority over the world. Now, I seem to remember that God created, and thereby really owns, the world. I seem to remember the Bible saying “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was *very good*.”³ Not just good, but *very good!* So where exactly does that leave room for ownership by Satan? Nowhere! So, I refute Satan’s claim to have power over the world—this is God’s world. The second lie Satan tries to sell Jesus is that Satan is somehow worthy of worship.

Of course, Jesus is wise to him on both counts, and he answers: “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”⁴ With one quick sentence, Jesus dethrones Satan as the supposed ruler of the world and illustrates exactly who he serves, while again referencing

² Luke 4:4, referencing Deuteronomy 8:3.

³ Genesis 1:31.

⁴ Luke 4:8, referencing Deuteronomy 6:13, 10:20.

Deuteronomy. Can you imagine having a Biblical debate with Jesus? That would be a lot of trouble—he knows the text from the inside!⁵

Undaunted, Satan tries a third time, whisking Jesus to the Temple and tempting him to fling himself from the very top, assuring him that God would send angels to protect him. Now is it only me or does old Satan seem a little desperate here? He starts to repeat himself. Again, he tries to cajole Jesus into demonstrating power as if Jesus has to prove anything to Satan. Again Satan says *If... If* you are the Son of God, Jesus...then make this unnecessary display of power.

The obvious temptation is to have Jesus demonstrate his special status. More subtly, Satan is trying to drive a wedge between God and Jesus. He is trying to put a strain on their relationship by having Jesus make ridiculous demands of God. Why create a situation from which God would have to save you when you weren't in danger to begin with? Why test God for nothing? Which is essentially what Jesus says in his closing quote of Deuteronomy—"Do not put the Lord your God to the test."⁶ Finally, Old Scratch gives up and lets Jesus be for awhile.

Throughout this encounter, Jesus is faced with temptations both obvious and more subtle. This is true in our lives, too. When we encounter temptation it is never what's expected. We may grasp the obvious parts of the temptations we encounter, but there are almost always more subtle temptations that accompany them. If I were to sleep in some Sunday morning when I was due here, I may indeed feel more well rested than on most Sundays. That's the obvious allure of that particular temptation. But there would be serious consequences. I would damage a whole network of relationships if I actually did so. I would damage my relationship with you all by letting you down and not meeting your expectations of me. And furthermore I would damage my relationship with God—both through hurting my relationship with you all and by betraying my promises to God as a Christian minister. And for all these reasons I manage to avoid that one temptation each week, but many temptations are more subtle to begin with.

It can be a challenge to discern them at all, much less to find some clever way to avoid them. Our consumer culture is always trying to convince us that we need the latest products to feed our spiritual hunger. We are continually offered things to fill our apparent holes. The right fashions, new cars, make up to make us feel prettier, and desserts so sugary they can literally knock us out. When we feel powerless, there are products and cultural norms designed to give us earthly power, glory and authority. Like video games where you get to mow down hundreds of faceless enemies. Or like prosperity gospels that encourage you to pray for wealth as a sign of god's⁷ love. Or various investments certain to mature quickly at the expense of exploited people from

⁵ Don Eddy rightly pointed out that Satan did not begin to quote scripture until the third temptation. Nevertheless. I am leaving this in place....

⁶ Luke 4:12, referencing Deuteronomy 6:16.

⁷ This is intentionally lower case since this is a false sort of god...

all over the world. And how can we forget the hundreds of reminders from our traditions of sexism, heterosexism, classism and racism to remind us of our place in the world and tell us which other people we have power over. These are all forms of temptations—temptations to misuse our power, rather than turning to God and one another to feel real power: the kind of power that comes from reaching out to one another in love, when the rest of the world is too caught up in self interest. The kind of power that comes from placing God at the middle of our life rather than off to one side. The kind of power that looks temptations in the face and finds another way around their insistent and flawed logic and into right relationships that nurture and sustain life and love and truth in the face of all the other stuff that our culture churns up to distract us.

That’s the kind of power we meet here to practice. That’s the kind of power *with* one another—instead if *against* one another—that God intended us to have all along. And it is the kind of power Christ demonstrated when confronting Satan’s temptations, which are never what’s expected, but *are* always able to be overcome when we keep God in the middle of our lives and hearts.

Amen?

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2where 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. 3The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” 4Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” 5Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6And 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. 7If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” 8Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” 9Then 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, 10for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ 11and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” 12Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” 13When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.