



Sermon

The First Sunday in Lent, Year C

March 9, 2025

Luke 4:1-13

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“The devil led him up and in an instant showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and 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, worship me, it will be all yours.’”¹

Today, Jesus is in the wilderness - in the desert - having fasted for forty days, immediately following his baptism. He is famished and exhausted and is being visited and tested by the devil. These tests probe who Jesus really is: “If you are the Son of God, prove it.”

Although we are not in a desert today and we are not out in the wilderness at this moment, we are familiar with tests and temptation. We are seeing tests like this happening in our country and in the world. The second test that the devil presents to Jesus is false: it is a lie and a trap, for the devil does not have the authority nor the power to give. The devil begs for surrender to this false power, this destructive lie. We see this test enfolding all too frequently in our country and in our world. Some surrender; some succumb; some agree to worship this lie and this false power, and give their own power over to it.

Jesus chooses otherwise. Jesus replies, quoting Deuteronomy as he does in each of his three responses, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.’”² Give yourself over only to God. Attribute the power that you have only to God.

God’s very Name in the Hebrew renderings and in our understanding means Mercy, God’s Name means Justice, God’s Name means Love.

Beholding, engaging, trusting, and working with this power that is Love is much harder sometimes than surrendering to an “easy substitute”, than giving oneself over to a lie.

¹ Luke 4:5-7

² Luke 4:8

Power is defined in a very simple way, even though our frequent and colloquial understanding and definition is “power over”. Power itself is simply the ability to make change. Power is the ability to influence and catalyze change.³ Power is the ability to bring about change, using such resources as authority, position, title, wealth, money...using such resources as courage and faith...using such a powerful resource as love.

Henri Nouwen writes, “What is it about the temptation of power [of this attractive lie] that is [to us and to many throughout history, that is in this country at this very moment, apparently] so irresistible? Perhaps it is because it presents an easy substitute for the hard work of love. It is easier to be God than to love God. It is easier to control people than to love people. It is easier to own life than to love life.”⁴

In the tests in our country and world today, many are choosing the easy substitute for the hard work of love, yet Jesus chooses otherwise.

How might we, with all the power—the ability to change—that we have (and we do have it) choose otherwise, and influence in the Name of the power of Love?

None of us are unfamiliar with testing, difficult decisions, or moral choices. They are part of the fabric of life and of the fabric - as we see in Jesus’ life and ministry - of faith.

Jesus is being tested immediately after his baptism. He is baptized by his cousin John in the River Jordan and goes right out to the desert—I guess to dry off—and while he’s there, he stays for forty days (which is biblical-speak for a very, very long time), understanding for himself who he is and, as the Godly Play telling of this story puts it, so that he understands deeply and clearly what “his work” is to be.⁵

In our own baptisms and the baptisms of others that we witness, there it is: testing! Testing is a part of our own baptismal rites. We might not always see it or recognize it as such, but there it is, in the Presentation and Examination of the Candidate.⁶ The candidate and their sponsors—their parents, their godparents—are asked a series of questions to test how deep is their commitment to the power of Love, and to shape all of us in offering and creating the conditions for the baptismal candidate and family to know Love so deeply and so clearly that when presented with the tests and choices and decisions that they will face, as we all do, they know Love and can choose it accordingly.

The questions begin, “Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?” Do you remember this question? When working with families and parents of babies, we go over the questions in advance and this one tends to stand out, because as a parent of an angelic baby, what does this have to do with anything? So, we review, and the response in our conversations is like “Yes, sure, sounds

³ Kathy Escobar, *Turning Over Tables: A Lenten Call for Disrupting Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2025), 3.

⁴ From *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey through Anguish to Freedom* (New York: Image Books, 1998), 78, quoted in Escobar, *ibid.*, 6.

⁵ Jerome W. Berryman, “The Faces of Easter III”, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play, Vol. 4: An Imaginative Method for Presenting Scripture Stories to Children, 20 Stories for Spring* (New York: Morehouse Education Resources, 2003), 45.

⁶ *Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 302.

good.” It’s not a question that’s top of mind as a young parent, but the next question follows immediately: “Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?” This is incredibly strong language, which is often jarring with a baby in arms—but nevertheless, it’s a question of what it’s all about. The next question: “Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?” And next: “Do you put your whole trust in Jesus’ grace and love?”

In the context of baptism, especially of an infant or child, the responses are easy: “Yes, of course, I renounce them, all of that, yes!” But as the child grows and all of us grow, we face these questions in a number of different ways. The test in our baptism repeats itself in so many situations in which we will find ourselves; we are continually tested and faced with difficult decisions and choices, and what do we choose?

Another question is asked of everyone gathered at the baptism: “Will you do all in your power to show this child - this person, this family - love, grace, mercy, and justice, such that, as they grow and as they face decisions and tests in their lives, they know love, they know what it is to be loved, and they then can choose love?”⁷

Lent is a season of change: the weather is changing, the times are changing. The word “Lent” itself means the “lengthening” of days (Daylight Savings is a little on the nose with that.) It is a time of personal and prayerful change, many of us taking practices of penitence and fasting - in whatever forms those may take - the purpose being to make space in our personal and family lives to hear God naming us “Beloved”, so that we can more readily choose love.

Lent is also a season of change for our community, for our communities of communities, for us as a whole people. In community, we have power. Let us not succumb to fear or overwhelm that would test or tell us that we do not have power, that we have nothing to say or to do in the face of lies, falsehood, and destruction. Our power is in the Name of Love. May we choose accordingly.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 303, paraphrased and expanded.