

The Third Temptation

Sermon for Lent 1, March 6, 2022

Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Sermon text: Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

I've been thinking about the third temptation.

The first two are clear enough: Number one, turn these stones into bread, use your magic power to make material abundance out of poverty, get rich! Number two, bow to Satan and in return receive a worldly throne, trade your soul for glory and power!

If really put to these tests—especially after an extended fast in the desert, or just getting knocked around by life—most of us would probably fail. We would succumb to temptation and use our justifying mind to soothe a troubled conscience. But Jesus so far has passed the tests, refuting the devil with scripture.

For the third and final temptation Satan employs scripture too (quotes from the psalm appointed for today) in order to appeal to Jesus' status as a holy one. If you are the Son of God prove it. Jump off the roof and see if God catches you.

The third temptation, the third test, is to put God to the test. And this temptation Jesus also refuses, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

I think I fail this one regularly. I think I fit the description of both Jew and Greek in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1:23): "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom." I pray for signs of God existence, power, justice and mercy. I study Scripture and ponder works of theology and science to see how God existence and purpose is revealed in the plan and working out of creation and history.

And I'm not alone. Many people profess unbelief, even scorn, at the idea of a personal God, with a will and purpose in creation, with love and concern for God's creatures, let alone the conviction that this God of all power became human to dwell among us, die for us and show us the way to new and eternal life. They dismiss Christian faith as obsolete, superstitious, irrational. Because God hasn't answered their prayer in the way they hoped for, or the leap of faith is too big a jump without sufficient evidence, and besides take a look at the world—and tell me, if God is so powerful, how comes there is so much evil and suffering, especially of innocents?

They have put God to the test and God has failed to pass. At least in their minds. And that used to be the way I thought of things too.

But I think I may be getting better, not because I no longer pray for signs and wonders; I still regularly pray for people in pain, for peace in time of war—such as now—for many things. And I still spend a good deal of my time on study of scripture and pondering theology, history and science (I am sort of obsessed that way). But I no longer *demand* from God anything. Instead I try to *thank* God for everything. I try to see God's signs and wonders in the ordinary world, his plan and love and wisdom in the steady unheralded sacrifices of regular people and the evolutionary splendor of the natural world.

And that certainly is a healthier approach at least psychologically—we know all kinds of studies about gratitude and so on—but it also includes a healthy dose of humility—and memory. Humility to realize I am not God or able to understand all mysteries. and memory like that Moses calls the Israelites to hold on to: remember that once they were slaves in Egypt, and now they are free and prosperous in a land of milk and honey. And therefore called upon to start with gratitude, not pride, first fruits, not second thoughts

I could say more about gratitude and giving but this is Lent, not stewardship season. Let's get back to Jesus. In the desert. Hungry. But also wondering, I think, what he will do next. He has just been baptized and during the act he received an overwhelming vision of his nature and call as the Son of God. It is just this call that Satan appears to have also noticed and comes down to check out and try to nip in the bud. If you are the Son of God, prove it (and thereby prove you are not). See John Milton's *Paradise Regained* for a poetic account of this showdown, resulting in a paradise regained (the cross is just a final demonstration).

Jesus may be unsure of what comes next but he is clear about one great thing: put your trust in the Lord and worship only God. Stand firm in the faith. "As it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." (Roman 1:18; Habakuk 2:4).

Let us all take that message to heart. And if you do it is my experience that your mind will follow as well. Things will get clearer, God more real, life more full of mystery and wonder. And you will have to make sacrifices and resist temptations!

One last story, a bible study story, to illustrate this point. We are reading Isaiah on Wednesday morning together. We got to chapter 7 and the verse: If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.'" (Isa 7:9b). And I recalled

that Pope Benedict, when he was just Cardinal Ratzinger wrote an Introduction to Christianity that I had read back in 1990 when I was wondering if I could believe in God and follow Jesus and baptize my son, whose baptism was on March 4, 1991, as my wife reminded me. That's how I remember when I read the book. because it really helped me understand some things about being a believer. namely, that in this life there is no guarantee, no proof of the existence of God or the truths of the faith. But what is certain is that you have to make a stand, a choice, whether to face toward God and try to live as you understand the will of God to be revealed, or you have to rely on yourself and those human mentors you respect. And he wrote about that line: that in some ways you will not understand, you will not stand firm, unless you first commit to taking hold, making a stand.

I shared that story with the members of the Bible study group—and it brought me back to that book. Now books and wisdom, signs and wonders—they are not what makes you believe in God. and if you are looking for them to prove God's existence and show you God's will then you are putting God to the test—and falling for the third temptation. But if you like Jesus stand firm in the trust and faith you have in God, then you will be made secure, you will, as Paul put it, be saved. The winds and currents will sweep around you but you will be standing on the rock of ages. You will be able to hold firm even in the most difficult of times—times we surely will see, that is one thing for sure.

May God help us. And may God help the people of Ukraine resist Russian aggression and the Russian people find their way to peace and freedom.

In Christ's name, Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Calkins
Grace Church, Millbrook NY