

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“The Easy Way”

Rev. David K. Groth

March 6, 2022

Luke 4:1-13 “The Temptation of Jesus”

Life is full of choices. Often these choices present us with a difficult way and an easy way.

Do the home work, or copy someone else’s during homeroom.

Get up early to exercise or pull up the covers.

Have the difficult conversation with your coworker or spouse or hope it will all pass.

Show up at an AA meeting or keep telling yourself you can quit anytime.

Work, save, give, volunteer, or relax, smoke a joint, and watch tv.

Life is full of choices. Notice, the easy way is not often the right way. In our text, we find Jesus out in the desert fasting, for forty days. Doesn’t sound easy. Who else is out there with him? The devil.

Soren Kierkegaard said somewhere, “There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn’t true; the other is to refuse to believe what is true.” My guess is most Americans fall in the latter camp. They refuse to believe the devil exists. And the devil would have it no other way. Predators love it when their prey are oblivious. But those who take the Bible seriously must also take the devil seriously.

In our text, Jesus has been fasting for forty days and for most of that time, the devil leaves Him alone. Not until Jesus is at a low point does the devil make his move.

That’s the first point. The devil is going to tempt you. That’s inevitable. That’s what he does. But don’t expect him when you’re feeling like your best self. Expect him and his attacks when you’re sick or injured. Expect him when you’re over-worked and worn out. Expect him when you’re old. Expect him just before you die. Every age has its peculiar temptations: adolescents may struggle with 6th commandment issues, the sexual sins. But some of our elderly, just before death, struggle with 1st commandment issues. The devil tempts them to a sort of faithless despair. Isn’t that just like the devil: take one last whack at us as we die.

In the case of Jesus, after forty days of fasting, the devil starts with food. “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” The devil attacks not just *when* we are at our lowest, but *where* he knows we are hurting, or wanting, or feeling shorted. Everybody’s hungry for something; what’s your hunger? For what are you yearning? For overdue recognition at work? Escape from the daily grind? Sex? The devil will exploit any perceived vulnerability. So, ask yourself, where are you most vulnerable right now? What steps can you take to shore up your defenses? One of the early church fathers said, “You cannot prevent the birds from flying in the air over your head, but you can certainly prevent them from building a nest in your hair” (WLS, p. 1344). In other words, don’t fixate on it. Luther said somewhere nothing fumigates the devil better than prayer.

“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” In other words, take the easy way. “Use your powers, Jesus, to satisfy your human needs and desires. You’ve disciplined yourself enough. Now it’s time to satisfy and reward yourself. To which Jesus says, “It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone.” Jesus quotes Scripture. In fact, with every one of the temptations, Jesus begins His response with, “It is written”. Sometimes to our ears Scripture sounds so old and irrelevant. But remember the Scriptures Jesus was quoting were already many centuries old in the first century, and they were already under attack by the skeptics in his day. So, if these ancient Scriptures were good enough for Jesus, they’re good enough for you and me. To withstand the assaults of the devil, Jesus uses the sword of Scripture.

Next, the devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and says to him, “If you worship me, it’ll all be yours.” Again, take the easy way. “You don’t have to be the Lamb of God splayed out on a cross. Worship me, and I’ll make you a political ruler the likes of which the world has never seen.” Of course, there’s the problem of the first commandment, but the devil forgets to mention it. Jesus reminds him, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’”

Can you see how the devil pokes around from different angles? He’s like a thief determined to break into your house. He’ll try the front door and back door and garage door. He’ll check for any open windows. He’ll climb up the roof or burrow underneath if it will help. He loves to wiggle his way in through the wireless router. He is relentless. Again, from Luther: “It is impossible to keep the devil from shooting evil thoughts and lusts into your heart. But see to it that you do not

let such arrows stick there. . . tear them out and throw them away” (WLS, p. 1344). Again, don’t fixate on them. When you fail and fall, repent right away. Don’t let the thing snowball and get worse. Ask God for His forgiveness and start over again with His grace. Remember also 1 Corinthians 10, “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. And when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (v. 13). Look for the way out. There’s always a way out. Luther suggested that when tempted don’t sit around ruminating; maybe go out and have a beer with friends instead.

Next, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem and sets him on the pinnacle of the temple. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” Of course, Jesus would use his miracles to heal people and feed them, and the like. But He never uses His powers just for entertainment’s sake or to impress. No miracle by itself will impress someone into saving faith. Faith comes by hearing the message. Without the message, without the Word of Christ, there is no true faith, no matter how impressive the miracles.

The devil often tempts us to take the easy way out. He hits his mark with us, but could not progress with Jesus. Jesus never took the easy way out. Right from the start . . . born on the go, laid in a manger, swiftly out of Judea to avoid Herod’s murderous henchmen. Later, there would be no cushy palace appointments for the boy. He would learn a trade and work as a carpenter. By the sweat of his brow, He would eat bread.

Once baptized, then came these temptations. He knows our struggles, and how beguiling Satan can be. He can sympathize with our weaknesses and has been tempted in every respect as we are yet remained without sin (Heb. 4:15).

Then begins His teaching and preaching ministry to hearts and minds that are slow to understand, slow to believe. Demons yelling at Him, disciples arguing over who’s number one. And then the crowds, so many people with so many needs, following Him wherever He goes, shouting at Him for mercy, begging Him, tugging on his clothes, interrupting him, wringing out every last drop of energy He had according to His human nature. And the religious authorities embedded in those crowds, testing him. Then comes the way of the cross. Jesus never chose the easy way.

After forty days of fasting, Jesus resisted the devil, and the devil fled (Jms. 4:7). But that’s not been our experience, has it? We live in a world marinating in temptation and sin. And, like God’s ancient people in the wilderness those forty years, we also fail miserably. And we continue to fail because that’s what we do. That’s who we are. We’re sinners.

So, as we consider this text, and ourselves face temptation, we should not imagine Jesus primarily as an example to follow. I don’t want you to walk away from this sermon thinking of it as a “how to deal with temptation” sort of sermon, with five easy steps. Not at all. Because then your focus and hope would be on yourselves, the strength of your faith, or your ability to quote Scripture. Don’t look inward. Look to Him!

I’m thinking of what Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” Why not? *Because we can’t handle it!* We fall to temptation all the time. Not even with an arsenal of memorized Bible verses on hand. Not even with good friends, and innocent distractions. We can’t handle it. But Jesus can . . . and did. He is the Second Adam who didn’t listen to Satan’s deceptions. He is the faithful Son, called out of Egypt, who withstood all the tests in the wilderness. He is our only hope in time of temptation. We deal with the devil’s invitations to sin not by turning inward for strength. That’s a sure recipe for failure. We turn to Him, to the Lord Jesus Christ, for His strength, His protection, and ultimately for His forgiveness.

God hates self-confidence because we are no match for the devil. **Christ is our confidence!** So, this is not a sermon on how to avoid falling into temptation. Instead, “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23). That’s where our hope is. That’s where our victory is found. Not in our own obedience, but in His. Not in our own faithfulness, but in His. “We preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor. 4:5), and Him crucified.

Please know, I’m not letting you off the hook. Resist Satan. Use Scripture. Shoo off that pesky bird who’s trying to build a nest in your hair. Pull out those arrows and throw them away. Tell the devil to go to you know where. Pray and sing; and maybe even go downtown and throw some darts or axes with some friends at the pub around a basket of cheese curds! But in the end, our only hope is Christ and Him crucified for us.

The bread we need the most is not the bread that comes from the easy way, turning a stone into bread. It’s the bread of life, his flesh, that comes to us the hard way. The wine we need the most is not the wine from the pantry as a form of escapism. It’s the wine that came the most difficult way, infused with His blood for the forgiveness of our sins. As soon as you taste the bread and wine on your tongue, you *know* you are forgiven, because “It is written.” “This is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”

Don’t be fooled. The devil is real. He’s stronger, faster, smarter than we are. But he’s also been defeated by the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, we fix our eyes on Him. We look to Him for protection. And we praise Him, because we remain His baptized children, forgiven, redeemed, beloved. Thanks be to God. Amen.