

Testing, 1-2-3
First Baptist Washington, February 25, 2007
The First Sunday in Lent
Luke 4:1-13

It was late February, 1996, almost exactly 11 years ago. I was traveling through the Holy Land with a busload of tired and hungry passengers. We had started out from Jerusalem that morning and come down that steep, twisting road that leads to Jericho—the same road the man in the parable went down when he fell among thieves, who beat him and stripped him and left him half dead. That didn't happen to us, fortunately, but we did stop for some sightseeing, and the trip itself was a long one, so when we rolled into the oasis of Jericho somewhere around 1:00 we were ready to stop. We drove past the date palms and citrus trees, loaded with fruit; past the pink and purple bougainvillea, climbing up the walls; past the poinsettia plants that grow to twenty and thirty feet tall, until at last we came to a stop in front of our restaurant. We got off the bus and stood stretching in the parking lot when somebody pointed out the name of the place—"The Temptation Restaurant"—and we all laughed, but what else would you call the restaurant that's right there at the edge of the wilderness where Jesus spent 40 days fasting and praying and being tempted by the devil? It was a good name. And then we went inside and found that there were other good reasons for the name.

I was the "bus captain" on that tour and so I got to sit with the tour guide and the bus driver back near the kitchen, where we all got the royal treatment. No sooner had we sat down at our table than a waiter brought out a pitcher of pulpy, freshly squeezed orange juice and another pitcher of sweet, lip-puckering lemonade. He hurried back to the kitchen to bring out stacks of warm pita bread and big bowls of hummus. He brought steaming falafel and skewers of grilled lamb and a whole roast chicken. And then, when we had eaten our way through most of that he

cleared away the dishes and brought out a pot of hot coffee and a platter of pastries, including one of my favorites—baklava. I was sorely tempted at the Temptation Restaurant, and I confess to you that I succumbed. I ate until I couldn't eat another bite.

It makes light of the temptation of Jesus, doesn't it, to compare it to that feeling we have when the waiter asks us if we'd like to see a dessert menu? Yes, we'd like to see a dessert menu. We'd like to *have* dessert. But we shouldn't. Still, we say...“Tempting!” There's that and then there's what Jesus went through in the wilderness for forty days, which is something else altogether. After I had finished that lunch and loosened my belt I stepped outside and looked out over that forbidding landscape, trying to imagine it as it might have looked in Jesus' time. No restaurant in sight. No sheltering roof. Just forty hot and sweaty days and forty cold and sleepless nights and running through all of it the constant refrain of gnawing hunger, until Jesus must have been right on the verge of collapse. And that's when the devil came to him.

That's different from being asked if you would like to see the dessert menu, and it might help us to understand that the Greek word we translate as “temptation” is a little different from that, too. The verb is *peirazō* and it is often translated as “test,” or “testing.” When we hear that word we don't usually think about dessert menus: we think about sitting in some high school desk with sweaty palms and a number two pencil, trying to remember everything we've ever learned about geometry, or chemical bonds, or the War of 1812. That kind of testing is done so your teacher can figure out how much you've learned of what she has taught, and how much work remains to be done, but there is another kind of testing that seems more applicable to our Gospel lesson for today, and that's the kind of testing that is done to see what something is made of.

Let's say you wander out into the wilderness after your lunch at the Temptation Restaurant and you find a rock that has some shiny, gold particles in it. Are they real gold, or something else? How would you find out? I don't have any personal experience in testing gold but I have done some research and learned that one way is to use a touchstone, a hard, black stone like jasper or basalt that you can scratch your rock against. Compare the streak left behind with the streak from somebody's gold wedding ring and you have a pretty good idea if it's the real thing. Or you can use a chemical test. You can scratch one of the gold flecks on your rock with a metal file and then apply a drop of Nitric acid. If it turns a bright green it's probably not the real thing, but if it turns dark brown it could be. And then there's my favorite: the "spark test." Although it is usually performed on steel the spark test involves putting a piece of metal to a grindstone and noticing the color, the length, and the branching of the sparks that fly from it. Apparently the sparks reveal everything.

So there you have it: three different tests for determining what something is made of. One involves scratching the substance across a rough piece of basalt, another involves cutting into it with a file and applying Nitric acid, another involves putting it to the grinding wheel and seeing what kind of sparks fly off. It is these kinds of tests—and not the temptation of fresh baklava—that come closest to describing what Jesus experienced in the wilderness. The devil was trying to find out what he was made of.

He waited until Jesus had gone without food for forty days, waited until he was famished, and then he came to him saying, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Did you hear that? "*If* you are the Son of God." In other words, if you have divine power use it: in the same way God turned a lump of clay into a living human being turn this cold piece of rock into a warm loaf of bread. Jesus was hungry. A loaf of bread would have

been mighty welcome right about then. But he wasn't going to use divine power for selfish purpose, and so even in his weakened condition he said, "It is written; one does not live by bread alone." And with that test one was over.

The devil then led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Again, it was all about power, but this time it was earthly power. "Worship me," the devil said, "and I'll make you king of the world." He was trying to see what Jesus was made of. He scratched the surface. He poured on the acid. But Jesus was the real thing: the Son who would not usurp his Father. He said, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" And with that test two was over.

The devil took him to Jerusalem, and put him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" The pinnacle of the temple was a long way up. A fall from that height would have killed an ordinary man. The devil was trying to see what Jesus was made of, wanted to see if he really was the Son of God. He pushed him up against the grindstone and watched the sparks fly. He was hoping he would find some weakness there, discover that soft spot that would make Jesus give in. But Jesus only answered, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" There's that word again—*peirazō*—"to test." It's used three times in this passage. And then Luke tells us that when the devil had finished every test, "he departed from Jesus until an opportune time."

What the devil learned about Jesus is that he *was* the Son of God. No matter how he scratched him against the rock, poured on the acid, or pushed him against the grindstone of temptation he found him to be the genuine article, through and through. He couldn't get him to do anything other than what God would do. But what about you? If temptation is a kind of test to see what you are really made of, what *are* you made of? You may not be the Son of God, but according to Scripture those of us who believe in Jesus have become the children of God. If you *are* a child of God, then what do you do when temptation comes your way? And what does that kind of test reveal about you?

In a book called *The God Who Comes*, a desert monk named Carlo Carretto speaks of his own temptation in the wilderness. He says, "In our community the other day there wasn't much coffee. Coffee does me good down here in the desert...it helps me...I am old. I was worried about not having any, about spending a few hours feeling dull and weak, and so—without perceiving the evil I was doing—I went into the kitchen before the others and drank up all that was left. Afterwards, having suffered all day and made my confession, I thought in shame of my selfishness, of the ease with which I had excluded my two brothers from those black, bitter remains. It seems a tiny thing, yet in that cup of coffee, taken and not shared with my brothers, is the root of all the evil which disturbs us, the poison of all the arrogance which selfishness, riches, and power create. The difference between me and Jesus is right here," Carretto says, "in an affair that seems simple but isn't at all; after a whole life time it is still there to make you think. Jesus would have left the coffee for his brothers; I did not" (p. 179).

I've read that story several times as part of my morning devotions and I always love it, partly because I love coffee and I can see the temptation it would be, but also because such a small thing reveals such a great truth. Our temptation, over and over again, is to love the Self

more than we love God or others. In the Great Commandment Jesus says that the most important thing in the world is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love others just as much as we love ourselves. It's that last part that's hard for us. Carlo Carretto probably would have given God the last of the coffee. But on that day, for whatever reasons, he loved himself more than others. Instead of lovingly measuring out that little bit of coffee into three equal portions he gulped it down when no one was looking.

And so the test that reveals what we are really made of can come at any time, and it can come in the smallest of things. Will you leave some coffee for your brothers, or will you drink it all up? Will you get up and go to church on a lovely Sunday morning or will you hit the snooze button? Will you take the time to talk with your daughter or just turn on the TV? C. S. Lewis once said, "Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heaven creature or a hellish creature" (p. 125).

According to Lewis' categories, Jesus was a "heaven creature" from the beginning. It's what the devil discovered when he tested him in the wilderness. He was the Son of God through and through, and no amount of temptation could make him put himself before God or others. And as we learn later in this story, no amount of temptation could make him put himself before us. But again, what about you? In the choices you make day after day, no matter how small, are you turning more and more outward, toward God and others, or are you turning more and more inward, toward the Self? These times of testing might be welcomed, because they not only *reveal* what we really are, they also give us the opportunity to *become* what we really are:

The children of God.

