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## TEMPTATIONS

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(adapted from sermon - Making Your Today Count for Tomorrow)

### SCRIPTURE LUKE 4:1-13

Luke portrays Jesus as the new Adam. There are three important stories that Luke stitches together at the beginning of his telling of Jesus' ministry. The first story is about Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan (**Luke 3: 21- 22**). The second story is Luke's version of Jesus' genealogy (**Luke 3:23-38**). The third story is about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (**Luke 4:11-13**). The three stories, together, are a powerful sermon upon the identity of Jesus. The first story, Jesus' Baptism, heralds the content of that identity: Jesus is God's Son! *'And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3: 22b)*. This declaration by God fleshes out Jesus' identity in an amazing way. Jesus is not just a Son. Jesus is a greatly loved Son. The language here is dynamic. God is revealed to be like a parent full of love and pleasure, vicariously enjoying the interdependent development of the child. Jesus then is the greatly treasured procreation of a loving and gracious God.

The very first procreation of God, according to the Biblical tradition, is Adam (**Genesis 5:1**). Adam, too, is God's greatly treasured procreation. Genesis also speaks of a dynamic loving relationship. In the first creation story when God creates the first human beings, they are described as being created in God's image (**Genesis 1: 27a**). The very essence of humanity is reflective of God's loving and gracious nature. So, too, Jesus is depicted as imaging his heavenly Parent. The second story of Jesus' genealogy (**Luke 3:23-38**) traces a familial line through the priestly and kingly families right back to Adam. For Luke, Jesus' identity is both the greatly loved son of God and the new Adam. Now this identity will be tested, as Luke moves us with Jesus into the wilderness. In some important ways the testing or temptation of Jesus – the new Adam, has strong resonances with the temptations of the first Adam in Genesis.

First, certain foods were forbidden to be eaten in the Garden of Eden. When tempted, Adam and Eve ate and therefore transgressed; death resulted according to Genesis (**Gen 2:15-17; 3:1-5**). In parallel contrast, Jesus, the new Adam, though

starving, when tempted to eat (**Luke 4:3**) resisted and remains firm in his identity as the Adam God intended, truly the Son of God.

Secondly, the original Adam is given power and authority over all creation (**Gen 1:26-28**). However, this Adam of Genesis is tempted along with Eve to abuse that power, ‘... *to become like God*’ (**Gen 3:5**). In contrast, Jesus, the beloved Son of God, resists the temptation of personalized power and remains obedient and faithful to God (**Luke 4:8**).

Thirdly, Adam and Eve are deceived by the tempter into believing that they will not die if they eat of the forbidden fruit. This contradicts the earlier divine imperative: ‘*The day you eat it, you shall die,*’ (**Gen 2:17**). Once again in Luke’s temptation of Jesus, the new Adam is also invited to disregard the divine order of things (**Luke 4:12**): the tempter places Jesus on the high point of the Temple and challenges him to throw himself off pinnacle, in order to defy death and put God to the test. Jesus resists this temptation, and for the time being the devil leaves him.

Jesus, according to Luke is the new Adam, the ideal Adam, which God had hoped the first Adam would be. Yet humankind could not resist the tempter without divine intervention. And so the message of the Gospel is that God, in his infinite wisdom, sent his greatly loved Son to be that intervention. Unlike the first Adam, the new Adam did not disobey God – rather the dynamic divine relationship of Grace is manifest in Jesus of Nazareth. Though the devil still lurks at the end of this passage, his days are numbered. With the first Adam, the devil wins. With the new Adam, the devil is defeated. The first Adam falls, the new Adam rises. For the new Adam is the greatly loved Son and nothing, not all the temptation the devil can amass, not even death itself, can sever the dynamic relationship between God and God’s incarnation – Jesus. At the Baptism, Jesus’ identity is sealed, and God’s outpouring love and grace remains intact throughout the great contest between Jesus and the power of evil.

The temptations of Jesus are also our temptations. Oscar Wild ironically said, “I can resist anything but temptation.” Luke provides us with three temptations that we all face. There is a sense in which all spiritual quests involve the testing and temptations. It is a theme that belongs to all the ancient faiths. On the spiritual journey, the pilgrim is driven to strange places, mystical and dark places. In these places the holy person confronts the demons and roaming spirits of their own fears, fantasies and frustrations. It is exactly these conditions of human beings that Jesus confronts in his battle with the tempter.

## FEARS, FANTASIES, FRUSTRATIONS:

### 1. FEARS

Even the strong have fears. Often, in fact, strength is built upon fear. Castles were built out of fear. Hitler and Stalin in many respects constructed their empires upon fear. We all have fears. Fear is part of the reality of a human being. It is in our strength that we can be most vulnerable to fear. Interestingly, the first temptation is an appeal not to Jesus' weakness, but to his strength. The tempter plays upon that strength – Jesus' identity. Jesus is God's Son. He is the new Adam. So surely he has the strength, the power, indeed the superhuman power, to overcome this great hunger he is experiencing in the desert. So the tempter provokes Jesus: *"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread"* (Luke 4:3). Can you imagine the degree of this temptation? It would be like being lost in a desert, days in the scorching, unrelenting sun, close to death and saying 'NO' to a cold glass of water that miraculously appears!

Luke tells this first temptation as a poignant reminder to us all, that we are not so strong really. It only takes an accident or a lustful temptation or a loss of job or a loss of a loved one and we realize how vulnerable we all are. Would any of us do what Jesus did in the desert? The threat of starvation or of death would rank amongst our greatest fears. What kind of strength is being demonstrated here? It is the strength of an identity that is thoroughly grounded in an absolute faith in God. So Luke's Jesus rebukes the temptation with the truth that he knows in the deepest recesses of his being: *"Humanity does not live by bread alone"* (Luke 4:4).

### 2. FANTASIES

One of the most dangerous fantasies of the human condition is the temptation of power. In the second temptation of Jesus, the tempter entices Jesus to substitute his spiritual power for personal power. Jesus is given a panoramic view of all the kingdoms of the world. The Devil proclaims, *"To you I will give their glory and all this authority ... if you, then, will worship me, it will be yours"* (Luke 4:7). Here is the perennial seduction to use personal power to bring some version of the kingdom of God on earth. This is the terrible seduction that particularly afflicts those who are given power and authority over others. The temptation here is to believe our own mythology. Here is the problem of idolatry, when we give others the impression that we are God-like.

Certainly, the spiritual life calls us to participate in the 'kingdoms' of this life. It is not as our governmental leaders would have us believe that Churches should keep

out of the political process. In a democracy we have a right to speak out and influence policy, just as any other legitimate interest group. Yet essentially, our job is not to seek to control or dominate or centralize power but rather, to work for a world that offers all equity and justice; a world that treats every living thing as sister and brother; a world of Eden that God envisioned before time. Jesus resists the temptation of personal power and instead, in humility, acknowledges that all power belongs to God. He answers the tempter: “*Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him*” (Luke 4:8). Power is perfected in weakness, said the Apostle Paul. That is, power and authority are transformative and liberating when we use them with great humility, recognizing our fallibility and that ultimately such qualities belong to God. Jesus of Nazareth remains our supreme example. In him, the new Adam, the new way of being is demonstrated for all time.

### 3. FRUSTRATIONS.

One of the most pervading problems for Christians is the frustrations of life. In our era especially, we are encouraged to live instantly. Increasingly, we expect to have our needs and desires met ‘yesterday.’ We live in an era of instant gratification. Yet we constantly find our expectations frustrated. The goods that our culture promises with such bright lights aren’t delivered. We are let down by the get-rich-quick schemes, the 30-minutes-a-day-and-your-body-will-be-transformed exercise machines, the all-you-can-eat diet programs, the 100%-investment-return plans, the professional voice on the phone that says, “Congratulations. You have just won one of three grand prizes; just call our sweepstakes number to claim your prize!” These voices are so tempting. No one is immune from such temptation. Neither was Jesus. Neither was the original Adam. The original Adam gave into that temptation, and it had deadly consequences. But Jesus resisted this temptation.

In the third temptation, the tempter takes Jesus to Jerusalem and places Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple. The devil, appealing to scriptural authority, tempts Jesus to throw himself off, for surely the Son of God will be protected. Jesus resists the temptation and declares with a counter injunction: “*it is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'*” (Luke 4:12).

It is tempting, oh so tempting, to embrace the quick fixes. However, in terms of finding real, lasting meaning and value in life, such indulgences are deadly. Jesus, the new Adam, resists the illusions of indestructibility of life without death. The original Adam acts in a God-like manner and as a result suffers the consequences of death. Jesus, the new Adam, accepts the frustrations of his wilderness journey, trusts God without needing to test God and consequently mortality loses its

pervasiveness. Learning to live within limitations, with frustrations and with faith and trust in God is to share the life enhancing journey and way of being human through Jesus Christ. When we resist the temptations of the frustrated ego, we make room in our lives for God to truly heal, restore, and save. Living this way is allowing God to be God. Living this way is to experience God as miraculous, liberating and eternal. Living this way is to find ourselves.

Jesus went into the wilderness to find out what it meant to be Jesus. The tempter in a sense helped him look at the possibilities. Jesus had to make some important choices. So do we. Some choices lead to fear, fantasy and frustration. The choice to follow Jesus, the new Adam, the new way of being, is to begin the process of living for the things we would die for. The tempter will always try to get us to die to get the things we would live for. This is what the first Adam could not resist, but the second Adam died to resist so that we can all resist and have everlasting life. This is the message of the season of Lent. It is a message that tells us who we are and how we are to live.

I wonder what we think we need to prove in our own lives. Years ago when we lived in Japan, we used to have a mama san (cleaning lady) who came once a week. Every night before she came, and on the morning of her visit, I'd rush around the house straightening up. I was cleaning up for the cleaning lady. How silly is that? Was I trying to prove to her that I really was a good housekeeper? What did I need to prove? The temptation was there to be something I was not. With four children, a husband and 24/7 military obligations, I needed help. It's a temptation we struggle with all the time – to appear smarter, richer, prettier, more powerful. We are beloved children of God. What more do we need to be?

God is there, always. The temptations are there, but they are merely an annoying low-level buzz compared to what God offers to us to help us, as long as we ask. Therefore, in this holy time of Lent, look at the temptations in your own life, whatever they may be. Ask God to help you see them for what they are, things that separate you from God. Pray God to see them as foolish things and to give you the strength to resist them. Know that God WILL help you, and when you trip over them, God will offer his love to help you back up.

To God be the glory