

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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An Opportune Time
Luke 4:1-13

A mighty battle of forces: good and evil, Jesus and Satan, the devil. But before we get there, let us lay the scene. Jesus has just come from hearing his cousin John the Baptizer preach repentance so powerfully that like many other people in the crowd, Jesus is moved to be baptized. But while he is praying something remarkable happens to him alone. The "... heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"¹

Dripping with the water of his baptism, led by the Holy Spirit Jesus goes into the wilderness. Can we even imagine what is going through his mind? One thing is clear, he is in a spiritually heightened and responsive state. He fasts and prays, totally open to God. And then it comes: the mighty battle, the forces of good and evil, Jesus and Satan, the devil.

But this battle has none of the human tools of war: armies, swords and knives. Nor does it have the supernatural. There are no bolts of lightning or whirling winds. It is a battle of the minds and words. The devil's battle gear is temptation. Jesus brings the foundation of his faith in God.

¹ Luke 3:21-22

The devil throws out the first temptation. “You’re hungry. Use your power to turn this stone into bread. Jesus throws off this attack like it is nothing. In fact, Jesus only gets halfway through his response before the devil knows it has fallen short of the mark. “Man does not live on bread alone.” But the rest of the phrase is, “but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”² Right out of the Hebrew or Old Testament. Jesus knew his scripture.

The devil then offers Jesus all the kingdoms in the world. All he requires in return is worship. Again Jesus responds from the foundation of his faith. Who here knows where this response comes from: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God?”³ The ten commandments!

Two strikes but the devil has one more trick in his bag. Jesus used scripture as his armor, so the devil tries to turn it against him. A taunt right from our invitation to worship this morning, Psalm 91: “...God will command the angels to protect you... On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” “So throw yourself off this cliff and prove it.” But Jesus doesn’t blink, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”⁴

² Deut 8:3

³ Deut 6:13

⁴ Deut 6:16

Strike three. The devil has struck out and cannot tempt Jesus away from his foundation in God. Instead he will look for an easier mark to try to destroy God's plans. The devil gives up, for now. He will go and wait until an opportune time.

These temptations mirror what the Israelites faced in the wilderness with Moses. Here we see that Jesus faces and overcomes the foundational human temptations. But how does this inform our lives today? I mean, very few of us are faced with the temptation of bungee jumping or skydiving every day.

So what kind of temptations are we faced with? Can you name some?

The first temptation Jesus faced seemed to be about bread. The Israelites needed food, a basic survival issue. They complained that when they were slaves in Egypt, at least they could trust their masters to provide food. The issue was that they needed to learn to trust God. Do we trust God? Like the Israelites, we have to avoid the temptation of placing our trust in anything other than God.

The second temptation was about Jesus worshipping Satan to gain power over the whole world. We may not be tempted to become ruler of the world. But we might be tempted to worship or place things as a higher

priority than God: education, money, prestige, possessions, a job, our family and friends, our church. What if God called us to do something radically different with our lives? What if God call us to do something radically different here at Hillcrest? Would we put our traditions or anything before following God? No is not an acceptable answer to the Almighty.

The temptations build to a climax and the third temptation is about testing God. What does it mean to test God? Satan encourages Jesus to throw himself off a cliff. But the Israelites did something simpler. After all God had done for them, freedom from captivity, rescue from Pharoah's army, guidance in the wilderness, promise of a home, and food, they still tested God. They still asked the question: "Is the LORD among us or not?"⁵ Do we ask this question?

Over the past two days I went to a Church Vitality conference and the answer there was yes. We test. We ask, "Is the LORD among us or not?" The UCC is losing 3 churches a week. Most of our churches are losing members or dying. If we keep going at this rate, by the time our newest seminarian is called to their heavenly reward, our denomination will not exist! But that is 50 years from now. We are only 50 years old. We're only halfway!

⁵ Exodus 17:7b

The biggest problem we were told is that we have lost sight of the fact that God is with us. But we know that we are called to be a church here. We know that we are called to tell people about God's unconditional love and bring justice. We know we are called to be progressive light in the world and in this part of LA County. We know we have a special and different message that people need to hear. We know God is among us! There is no question, no test.

God has done amazing things in our lives and in the life of this church. Yet we test God over and over and ask the question is God with us. This is the sin of despair and despair is the property of the atheist. Hope is the property of the believer in God, the believer in resurrection, the believer who knows they can trust in God, the believer who puts God first in their lives.

So how do we avoid this temptation? I take some of this from the example of our brothers and sisters in AA. One step at a time and one day at a time. First we admit that we are human and subject to temptation, especially to despair and giving up. It's hard. So what?! Suck it up and move on.

Second we acknowledge that there is a higher power who abides with us. If anyone here cannot do this one, we seriously need to talk.

Third we band together to examine who we are and who God is calling us to be and serve in this place. We admit that doing the same things over and over expecting a different out come is the definition of insanity. We figure out what is working and what is not, and we work together to change, so we can grow as a church and as people of God. We learn to risk and try new things and understand that there are no mistakes if we learn from everything that happens.

Fourth, we truly reach out to others. We realize we are not here to nurture and serve each other. We are here to serve the people who are not yet here. We reach out and become the church that we are meant to be. Vital, enthusiastic, exciting, interesting. A place new people want to be. Actually, if we become a place where all of us are excited to be, then we will want to invite others to come. And they won't want to say no.

At the end of our story today, Satan slunk away to try again at an opportune time. This is an opportune time. Temptation is all around us. But we will not test God and give in to despair. Hillcrest, we know God is with us. Let us live it and go and tell the world!