

## Communion Meditation

### Coming Home Different: The Power of Obedience

Focus: Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee—Luke 4:14

If it were possible to imagine that those three questions of the dread spirit had been lost from the books without a trace, and it was necessary that they be thought up and invented anew, to be put back into the books, and to that end all the wise men on earth—rulers, high priests, scholars, philosophers, poets—were brought together and given this task: to think up, to invent three questions such as would express in three words, in three human phrases only, the entire future history of the world and mankind—do you think that all the combined wisdom of the earth could think up anything faintly resembling in force and depth those three questions that were actually presented in the wilderness? For in these three questions all of subsequent human history is as if brought together into a single whole and foretold.—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

First Scripture Lesson: Luke 4:1-14

Second Scripture Lesson (during sermon): Luke 14-22

#### **First Scripture Lesson Luke 4:1-14**

At first glance, no story, Biblical or otherwise, might seem more remote, more fantastic, farther from our ordinary, everyday experience than this one. Set 2000 years ago, halfway around the world. We're told that Jesus had been fasting in the wilderness—and had been tempted by the devil there—for forty days.

And then, at the end those forty days, Jesus and the devil engage in a kind of Scripture-quoting co, which includes the devil showing Jesus—in an instant [snap]—all the kingdoms of the world that ever have been, are or will be, and then transporting Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, challenging him to throw himself off from there.

Hardly the stuff of **our** ordinary, everyday experience—at first glance. But if we look a closer: perhaps no other story so succinctly captures all of our experience, and all human experience, even all human history, better than this one. So Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “In these three questions all human history is as it were brought together into a single whole and foretold.” More on that later.

For now, listen now for God's Word to us. The Temptation of Jesus, the Gospel of Luke Chapter 4 verses 1-14:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

Then the devil 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 can give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”

Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying 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.’”

Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Then Jesus, returned to Galilee, filled with the power of the Spirit.

## **Sermon**

I’ll read our Second Scripture Lesson later in the sermon, but for now let’s stick with the first—the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness.

It’s a story about power, about the devil tempting Jesus to use his powers—really, to misuse them—in ways that would be disobedient to God’s Word and God’s will. And it’s also a story about Jesus’ true power—and ours.

“Turn this stone into bread”—that’s power over nature.

“You can rule over all the earthly kingdoms in all their glory”—that’s power over humans.

“Throw yourself down from here—God will send angels to lift you up—that’s power over God.

These three kinds of power are temptations for Jesus, because each corresponds to a certain kind of human vulnerability. And by tempting Jesus to use his powers in these

ways, the devil is tempting him to evade those human vulnerabilities, and so to forsake his humanity.

We humans are vulnerable to nature. Hunger and thirst; pestilence, drought, and famine; storm, flood, and fire; accident and sickness; disease and death—all these (and many other things like them) can, and do, afflict us.

We're also vulnerable to other humans. We lock our doors and watch our backs; man our armies and build our navies; stockpile our weapons and patrol our airspaces. And when it comes to our psychological—emotional and intellectual—vulnerabilities . . . well, the defenses we construct for them are even more extensive and elaborate—and even more costly.

And we humans are vulnerable to God. This one is harder for me. I'm far more comfortable saying that God neither causes or condones our suffering; but is actively bringing about its end. The Book of Revelation gives us a vision of that end:

See, the home of God will be among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.”

But all the same, it has to said: that for the time being at least, God **does** allow us to suffer. And sometimes, “for the time being” can seem like forever. So, if we are honest about it, if we say what we feel and not what we think we ought to say, we have to say it: We humans are vulnerable to God.

And Jesus, human just like us, shares these vulnerabilities.

He's vulnerable to nature: After fasting for 40 days in the wilderness, he is famished. He gets tired, and needs to sleep. From the cross, he cries, “I thirst.”

He's vulnerable to humans: He has grown up under imperial Roman rule, and soon enough he will be “betrayed into human hands, undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed.” And he will know the anguish of being deserted and betrayed by his friends.

And he's vulnerable to God: as he prays in the Garden at Gethsemane, he sweats blood; and from the cross, he cries “ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Sometimes suffering “for the time being” can seem like forever.

And that's why we get it backwards if we say that Jesus uses his superhuman powers to resist the devil. That's precisely what the devil is tempting Jesus to do—to use—to misuse—his superhuman powers. And he does it with one little word: "if":

**"If** you are the Son of God, then prove it: command this stone to become a loaf of bread. You are hungry, aren't you?"

**If** you are the king of kings, and the lord of all lords—then look here, this instant [snap]—here are all the earthly kingdoms in all their glory, past, present and future. **If** all this truly does belong to you, then all you have to do is worship me, and it will all be yours—here and now.

**"If** you are the Son of God, then prove it, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'

In all three temptations, Jesus response is (in effect) the same: "There is no IF about it, and there is no doubt about it: I AM the Son of God, and that means first, last, and always that I must obey the Word and the will of God."

It is God's Word and God's will that Jesus share our humanity and our human vulnerabilities, **fully**, to the very end. It is God's Word and God's will that Jesus, being found in human form, humble himself and become obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

It is God's Word and God's will that the Son of Man, be betrayed into human hands, undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

In the wilderness, Jesus does not use his superhuman powers to resist the devil's temptations. Just the opposite: he refuses to use them so he can remain obedient to God. Jesus remains obedient to this the very end—and therein lies his true power—his faith.

And so the scene in the wilderness ends with these words: "when the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time."

Did you catch those last words? The devil departs from him, "until an opportune time." In other words, he'll be back to tempt Jesus again. And the devil does come back to tempt Jesus, at several opportune times..

When Peter says, "Master, **if** you are the Messiah, you don't need to suffer and die," the devil's right there. Jesus knows it, and once again proves obedient: "Get behind me, Satan!," he says. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

When they come to arrest him in the Garden, and one of his followers draws his sword to stop them, the devil is right there. Jesus knows it, and once again proves obedient:

“Put your sword back into its place!” he says. “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?”

As Jesus hangs on the cross, When the passers-by shout up at him, “Save yourself! *If* you are the Son of God, come down from the cross,” the devil is right there.

And when the chief priests, the scribes and elders, mock him on the cross, “*If* He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him, let God deliver him now, for he said, ‘I am God’s Son,’” the devil is right there.

But even on the cross, Jesus knows it, and once again, he proves obedient to the very end: “Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last.”

It is God’s Word and God’s will that Jesus share our humanity and our human vulnerabilities *fully*, to the very end; that he humble himself and become obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross; that the Son of Man, be betrayed into human hands, undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

And Jesus is obedient—he has faith—to the end. That is his true power. And so Jesus becomes, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

Those three human vulnerabilities—to nature, to other humans, and to God—they define our earthly lives, they are inherent to our human condition. Hence Dostoevsky: “In these three questions all human history is as it were brought together into a single whole and foretold.”

And there’s nothing wrong with our trying to lessen these vulnerabilities. In fact, it’s both natural and right—a good thing.

To use our knowledge of the natural world to improve and extend human life—our understanding of biology, for example, to inform the practice of medicine, and thus to reduce our vulnerability to disease—that’s good. But with our power over the natural world, from the subatomic level to the atmospheric, we also threaten not only our own lives but also the life of our planet

To learn to communicate and cooperate with more human beings than ever before, in ways and on a scale never before imagined—that’s a good thing. But with that power, sometimes with nothing more than a keystroke, we can lie and manipulate on a scale and with a speed never before imagined and thus do unthinkable, often irreparable, harm to our fellow humans.

To pray and to worship God, so that our wills become one with God's will—as for example, Jesus does when he prays in the Garden at Gethsemane, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.”—that's a good thing.

But too often, far too often, our prayers and our religious rituals become efforts to subject God's will to ours, to place God at our beck and call. Or worse still, we use them as the outward appearance of godliness to get what we want from our fellow human beings—power, money, status, adulation—a corruption religious leaders are particularly prone to, in Jesus' time as well as our own.

In a nutshell, like Jesus, we too are tempted to use—really, to misuse—our powers in ways that are disobedient to God's Word and will. But unlike Jesus—alas!—we have succumbed to that temptation, we have forsaken **our** humanity. We can see that daily in the events of the day on cable news (it's been especially, tragically, obvious lately), but I can also see it—and feel it—daily in myself. “In these three questions all human history is as it were brought together into a single whole and foretold.”

Which is why we need Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith—not so much because we need faith in general, but because we need **his** faith. Not a faith like his, but **his** faith. We need **his** faith so that we too can resist temptation, and embrace, and not forsake, our humanity, so that we too can live our lives in obedience to God's Word and will.

After those forty days in the wilderness, when he comes home, Jesus is different. Jesus (we are told) returned to Galilee “filled with the power of the Spirit.” His time in the wilderness not only tested his faith, it confirmed it: With an assurance of who he is and what he is about, Jesus now begins his earthly ministry: “and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.”

And when he comes home to his home synagogue in Nazareth, well, his folks there most certainly notice the difference. **Luke Chapter 4, our Second Scripture Lesson, beginning with verse 16:**

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom, and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah that was given to him. He found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

That's easy enough for us to say—but it may not have been for them. My guess is that it a while before they could say anything at all.

I mean, think of what Jesus is saying here: this passage from Isaiah, the one where the prophet speaks of God's anointed one, that is, the one who is filled with God's spirit, who is to bring good news to the poor, release the captives, give sight to the blind, and free the oppressed—the one who is to initiate the time of God's reign—that is who *I* am and that is what *I* am about.

Think of him saying that to the people who watched him grow up: he's different alright. And the home folks notice: When they finally can speak, we're told that all were amazed at his gracious words, at first all they can say is: “Isn't this Joseph's son?”

He comes home different: His faith is assured. Which is not to say that it won't be tested again; it will be, and in the most trying of circumstances—for Satan “the opportune times.” In fact, it will be tested right then and there in his home synagogue as has his own people quickly turn against him (“Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the his hometown.”). But from here on out, he is different: he has the assurance of his faith.

Which is the faith we need—the assurance of *his* faith. And he will give it to us. Again, the Letter to the Hebrews: “in him, we have a great high priest, who is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses, one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet is without sin.”

And it is that high priest who is present here with us at this communion table today: “take eat this is my body broken for you; drink from this cup; it is the cup of the new covenant; sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.” Here he gives us himself; here he gives us his faith.

And so it's my hope and prayer that we too will come home different. To prayer, to our Lenten and Easter services in the weeks ahead, to doing our Lord's work in the world, to the the joy of learning together, to our friendship, our life together, in Christ—it is my hope and prayer that we will come home to all of these different—with his faith assured in us, obedient to God's Word and will, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, fully human.

Because that is his true power—and thanks to him, ours too.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.