

The New Covenant

The season called Lent is much more than a somber focus on the death of Jesus. This is a time to probe your



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faith, to remember the Jesus “who was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). This is a time of serious self-examination as we understand Jesus’ love for us is experienced in the challenges of our everyday world. This text reminds us that Jesus really is one with us. So, as you study this story about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, you should feel the strong urging of the Holy Spirit to examine your personal spiritual pilgrimage, your weaknesses and strengths, the depth of your trust in God when life falls apart and a reminder that Jesus truly understands the challenges of living in a wilderness kind of world.

The other concept I urge you to grasp is the meaning of the word “tempt.” Our English frames “tempt” as a negative word along the lines of seducing one to do wrong or to choose a spiritually destructive path. But the popular devotional commentator, Dr. William Barclay, reminds us that the Greek word used here means “to test,” as in proving a strength or worth. Jesus has just been baptized by John the Baptizer when the Holy Spirit appeared in the symbolic form of a dove and God’s voice affirmed Jesus as his Son.

There is a sudden change in mood and setting, as Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit. Jesus begins his ministry, not surrounded by exciting popularity but in one of the most inhospitable places on earth – a barren expanse between the Dead Sea and Jerusalem. I have been there in the intense heat, with its heavy atmosphere, crumbling rocks and loneliness. With no human companionship and following forty days and nights of fasting, Jesus faced a choice of consequence, not only for himself, but for generations who would live with the constant clash of good and evil, and a frequent sense of spiritual loneliness. We should not reduce Jesus’ wilderness challenge to a simple parable, although it does help us see that the Christian life is marked by challenges, failures as well as

successes and repeated opportunities to examine God’s grace as we grow in faith. When have you, by chance or challenge, sought to be alone with God to regain strength and direction?

Watching Jesus confront the snares Satan places before him reveals that Jesus has not come as a religious reformer, a political leader or a champion of material success. The temptation Jesus faces are extremes crafted to appeal to his purpose for coming into the world. Satan’s lies seem subtle, but they are blatant examples of how evil can masquerade as harmless. Satan capitalizes on Jesus’ hunger, exhaustion and loneliness as the carefully crafted temptations unfold.

Satan begins with the obvious human instinct for self-preservation (v. 3). Jesus has been in the grueling wilderness for forty days, allowing himself only a bit of bread and water each day, alone with the wind and relentless heat. Did visions of meals at home with his family in Nazareth form in his thoughts? The tempter appeared with an innocent-sounding suggestion, backed by the truth: “Since you are God’s Son, command these stones to become bread.” What difference will it make? Who will it hurt? No one will ever know! But in Jesus’ humanity there is also the love and grace of God and a purpose that predated the first day of creation and the covenants of the Old Testament. Jesus declared the most basic truth of life: “People won’t live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.” Referring to Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus’ life would be shaped around God’s purpose of redemption, not Satan’s subterfuge.

The second temptation morphs out of Jesus’ answer to the first. The devil carries Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem, the place historically connected to Israel’s history and God’s promises (v. 5). Satan places Jesus on the highest point of the Temple, a visible height visible to all of Jerusalem, and tells Jesus to jump so that God may rescue him. All Jerusalem would then know with absolute certainty that Jesus is the Messiah. Psalm 91:11-12 is quoted as proof the Messiah would perform miracles and be more powerful than anyone or anything in this world. What a short cut to greatness! But Christ did not come to be a miracle-worker, a charismatic leader, a force for Jewish

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Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

independence or a worldly king. We learn here that Satan can misquote Scripture easily, but the truth of God cannot be reduced to earthly power or popularity by our world’s definition. We do not test God or manage God to accomplish redemption. Jesus is God in human flesh. We become God’s children when we give our life to God and his Holy Spirit comes to live within us and helps us grow to be more like Christ in this world.

The third temptation finds Jesus carried away to a “very high mountain,” from which the devil invites Jesus to observe all the nations of the world (v. 8). The evil one pulls out all the stops, offering to give Jesus everything – power, riches and world dominance – without suffering. There is, of course, one little condition: Jesus must fall down in worship before the devil! This is the final obscenity, as Jesus dismisses the master of lies. “Go away Satan, because it is written, you will worship the Lord your God and serve only him” (v. 10). The devil is a master of putting ideas together in a way that seems acceptable, if not wise, and effective for reaching a worthy goal. If the result is good, what difference do the methods matter? Does the end justify the means? But is the “end” actually the goal that was needed?

We struggle with how Jesus could be human and divine at the same time. We desperately hold on to God’s grace, while sometimes wondering how the Eternal God can love us so completely. We watch Jesus from his Bethlehem birth, through his years of ministry, to the cross and resurrection...and we see God, not as an indescribable light beyond the universe and a voice that causes mountains to tremble, but as a man walking the dusty roads of this world, embracing those who are suffering or persecuted, loving as he teaches us to love. In the wilderness, and every day thereafter, Jesus said “no” to the devil all the way to the cross. That is God’s incomparable love. That is our hope.

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.