

**Sermon series: New Beginnings**  
**Things Get in the Way by Jeff McClain**  
**Luke 4:1-13**

**Boone UMC**  
**February 7, 2016**

Friends it's good to be back in Boone. My wife and I were in Chicago last week for a pastors' conference. We make it a point to attend every year. It's an opportunity for us to reunite with our seminary classmates, to worship, learn, rest, and recharge. We had a very rich and fulfilling week, and I'm looking forward to practicing here what we learned there.

Upon seeing a Facebook picture Carrie posted of us in downtown Chicago I got a call from my father asking me, "So, they don't sell razors in Chicago or what?" No dad, I'm just giving up shaving for Lent. Thought I'd get a head start (not really).

Today's sermon text is often read on the first Sunday in Lent. Forgive us for being slightly ahead of the season. As David said, Lent officially begins this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, and I look forward to being together then for food and worship. Lent is the season of the church year where we prepare to follow Jesus to the cross. It's a season of self examination, repentance, and drawing closer to Christ. Many of us utilize the season of Lent to get serious about spiritual disciplines that strengthen our relationship with the Lord. But when we make decisions to grow in our faith and to participate more fully in God's kingdom, challenges often arise. Things get in the way. The same is true even of Jesus, as we'll see in today's text. But take heart – God is with us even when things get in the way. Hear this word from Luke chapter 4.

**Luke 4:1** *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 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. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone.' "*  
**5** *Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 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. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."*  
**8** *Jesus answered him, "It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' "*  
**9** *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, 10 for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11 and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "*  
**12** *Jesus answered him, "It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "*  
**13** *When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God!**

Today is the final sermon in our series New Beginnings. Often times when we make a decision to start something new it seems as if the universe conspires against us, and things suddenly get in the way. When I look back at times in my life when I've made decisions to follow Jesus more closely, crazy things have happened. Maybe you've experienced this, too.

When I decided to go to seminary I planned to apply for scholarships to pay for tuition. But when I told my pastor, he surprised me by saying that wouldn't be necessary. It turned out the church had a fund in place to pay seminary tuition for any church member who wanted to pursue theological education. That was a pleasant surprise! So I didn't apply for a scholarship because I didn't want to potentially take one away from someone who didn't have any church support. Months passed, and then two weeks before I was to leave for school my pastor called me into his office. With a heavy heart he told me that Finance had met the night before and due to a technicality they were not going to be able to pay my tuition after all. I called the seminary and explained my situation but by then all the scholarships for the year had already been awarded, and there was nothing they could do to help. I was devastated.

A few days later I got a call from a friend with a job offer. He said, "I know you decided to go to seminary, but I came across this opportunity and I just had to ask." The job was definitely intriguing. The salary was almost double what I was making at the time, and my friend said the job was mine if I wanted it. Now I had no doubt God was calling me to seminary. But I had no idea how to pay for it after my original plan fell through. And all the sudden this new opportunity just fell in my lap. Interesting timing, huh? Crazy things happen when you make decisions to pursue Jesus more deeply.

Now I'm not necessarily saying those developments were orchestrated by the devil, but they certainly made it tempting to bail on seminary and take the new job. At the same time though, throughout that series of events I felt God's presence strongly. And I also felt reassurance that God would provide a way. And now nearly a decade later, given that I'm speaking to you from a pulpit in Boone and not from a corner office in Pennsylvania, I think you know which way I chose. Thanks be to God for making a way! (And thanks be to student loans, too.)

When we make decisions to follow God more closely we shouldn't be surprised when things get in the way. When Jesus began his public ministry, that's when temptation arose for him. Listen again.<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness...

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Luke 4:1 NRSV

There's an entire sermon right there in that verse. First of all, Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. He had just been baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, and the Holy Spirit had descended on him like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased." God affirmed Jesus' identity and filled him with the Holy Spirit so that he could begin his ministry in full. But even before Jesus begins his ministry, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness.

The wilderness is a theologically rich place in the bible. It's where God's most formative work happens. The wilderness is a place of emptiness and barrenness. It's a place that inspires (or requires!) total dependence on God. The wilderness is where the children of Israel spent 40 years being formed before they entered the Promised Land. And it's no coincidence that Jesus spends 40 days being tested there as well. He is led there by the Holy Spirit. Don't let anyone tell you that following God means you'll be safe and secure. You might just find yourself in the wilderness..or on a cross.

Just like Israel, Jesus meets temptation in the wilderness. First the devil tempts him with food. Tom Wright, a biblical scholar I love, reminds us that Jesus is not Superman. He's not an all-powerful kind of computer-age super-magician running around zapping reality into any shape he'd like.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is human, after all. After 40 days with no food, he is hungry. Famished, in fact. And the devil knows exactly how to seek out vulnerability.

The devil taunts Jesus – *You hungry? Turn these stones to bread!* But Jesus admonishes him with scripture: "It is written that one does not live by bread alone." That word comes from Deuteronomy (8:3), during Israel's time in the wilderness. Jesus, the Word made flesh, uses God's word to repel the devil's temptation. That should teach us something about the importance of memorizing scripture and having God's word written in our hearts.

In the second temptation the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. It's a temptation to power, and I have to admit it's more than a little scary to me that the devil has the authority to offer that. But Jesus doesn't refute the devil's claim. Rather Jesus recognizes that his own path to the power, the kingdom, and the glory lies not in idolatry but in servanthood and obedience to the one true God – the only one worthy of our worship and service.

In the third temptation the devil takes Jesus to the top of the temple in Jerusalem. Some scholars say this is a foreshadowing of Jesus' fate to die in Jerusalem and that the devil is goading him to short-cut that fate. That makes this temptation a test in two ways. First it's a test of God to save Jesus, and the devil even quotes scripture from Psalm 91. Secondly, he is testing Jesus to skip the

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Wright's commentary *Luke for Everyone*, p. 42

way of the cross. It's as if he's saying, "Don't wait for God's way, take matters into your own hands and show everyone how God will lift you up!" But Jesus doesn't buy it. He says, "Don't put God to the test." And the devil gives up, for the time being.

There's an important phrase in these temptations that I want us to consider for a moment. Twice the devil starts out by saying, "**IF** you are the son of God..." He's striking at Jesus' identity. The devil feasts on human insecurity and loves to cast doubt on things God says. This question echoes back to Genesis when the serpent asks, "Did God **really** say you shouldn't eat from that tree? Surely you won't die, but your eyes will be opened and you'll be like God!" So subtle. So crafty. **If you are the son of God, prove it – turn stones to bread! Throw yourself down and let God save you! Surely God wouldn't want you to be hungry or to get hurt?** Temptation can be so subtle. So crafty. So close to truth. And yet so destructive.

You've heard these kinds of questions, too, haven't you? I know I have. *You say you're a Christian but you did **that**? Or said **that**? Or had **those** thoughts? Surely you're not a **real** Christian, or a **true** follower of Jesus, or a very **good** pastor!* And somehow I manage to convince myself sometimes that that voice in my head is coming from God, not somewhere else. I love that line<sup>3</sup> from *The Usual Suspects*: "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."

God's voice never casts doubt about who we are. God's word may well convict us but it never condemns us. God's word says, "This is my son, my daughter, my child, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus knew that word. He knew it by heart, deep in his soul. He knew he was God's beloved. And the truth of that word allowed Jesus to succeed where God's children before him had not. Adam and Eve gave in to temptation and ate the fruit. When Israel got hungry in the wilderness they complained against God. When they doubted God's sovereignty they resorted to worshipping idols. When things didn't go their way they tested God. But Jesus changes the script on temptation.

Jesus is able to resist all three of these temptations because he knows who he is and he trusts fully in God's promises. He's obedient to *God's* plans, not his own. I said earlier that Jesus is not Superman. He was fully human, and he experienced needs, wants, and temptations just like us. But he is Jesus. And he overcame them perfectly with complete trust and dependence on God, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The writer of Hebrews<sup>4</sup> says Jesus was "Tested in every way as we are yet he was without sin." Jesus was without sin.

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<sup>3</sup> Attributed to the movie "The Usual Suspects"

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 4:15 NRSV

But we're not. We will fail. We will sin. All sin and fall short of God's glory. Temptation will get the better of us from time to time. Things will get in the way of our walk with God. That's a reality of being human. I think it's important to name that truth here this morning. It doesn't do much good to say, "Look, Jesus was tempted and he didn't sin – go and do thou likewise!" Well that's great, but I'm not Jesus! And neither are you! That premise is dangerous because it sets us up for failure. It causes us to focus more on our guilt than on God's grace.

In full disclosure, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, did believe that we could achieve perfect and sinless lives here on earth. But it requires a lifetime of transformation, continually growing closer to Jesus. And even then it's nearly impossible. But we don't need to give up in despair! We can change. We can be transformed. We can turn away from sin and temptation and turn back toward God by doing what Jesus did: remembering who we are – God's beloved children – and trusting in God's promises.

This is actually part of what makes Lent such a powerful season. We have a special opportunity to reflect and focus on repentance and confession. And in doing so we realize God's grace more fully. Hebrews 4:16<sup>5</sup> goes on to say "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

I mentioned earlier that I make it a point to attend that pastors' conference every year. One of the reasons it's so important to me is that I'm a part of a guys group, a group of holy friends. We met in seminary and we keep in touch throughout the year. We're also committed to meeting in person at least once or twice a year. We gather to ask each other how it is with our souls. We celebrate our joys and successes. We admit our fears and failures. And we confess our sins and shortcomings. And then we pray for one another, forgive one another, and encourage each other. It's incredibly rich and life-giving. I encourage each of you to seek out a group of holy friends with whom you can share your life and through whom you can be reminded of God's grace to help in time of need. Some of you have those friends through your community group. It's not too late to join one. Today is the last day for this round of signups, and there will be more to come. See Pastor Vern for more on that.

Next week we'll kick off a new sermon series entitled "Rhythms." It will help us focus throughout Lent on spiritual practices that draw us closer to Jesus as we journey toward the cross. We often find meaning in giving something up for Lent in order that we might be more in tune with Christ's sacrifice for us. So what might you give up for Lent? There's nothing wrong with giving up things like chocolate or alcohol or TV for Lent. Many people do this. I've done it before too, and those things have sometimes drawn me closer to Jesus in the process. The fact is that most

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Hebrews 4:16 NRSV

people (outside of addiction), with a strong enough sense of determination alone, can successfully manage to give those things up...at least for a short time. By sheer will power we can do that on our own.

In light of today's text, a more interesting question is **what might you give up for Lent that you can't possibly give up without God's help?** What's something you could never accomplish on your own power but only by the grace of God?

How about giving up anger? What would it be like to give up road rage, or frustration with your kids or parents or neighbors? In this season of heightened political awareness, what would it look like to give up criticizing the other side? What would it look like to give up self-doubt? Or insecurity? How about giving up resentment, or comparing ourselves to others, or bitterness? What would it look like to give up worrying? Or stress? Or control? What would it look like to give up fear?

For most of us, these are things that we can't just will ourselves to stop. The temptations to give in are far too strong, and we simply can't resist them on our own. We need Jesus. I love the old hymn "I need thee every hour." The second verse says this:<sup>6</sup>

I need thee every hour; stay thou nearby.  
Temptations lose their power when thou art nigh.  
I need thee, O I need thee. Every hour I need thee.  
O bless me now, my Savior, I come to thee.

Temptations lose their power when thou art nigh. What might it look like in the midst of our moment of weakness, during our moment of temptation to take a step back, take a deep breath, and simply pray, "*I need you, Lord. I can't do this on my own. I need you every hour.*"

Temptations lose their power when God is nigh. Jesus knew this. Jesus lived this. In the wilderness Jesus had nothing with him but the presence of God's Spirit and the intimate knowledge of God's promises. And that was enough. God's word says that "the Lord is near to all who call upon him." Jesus, the very Word made flesh, knew that promise and lived in it. Temptations lose their power when God is nigh.

Where will you allow the Spirit to lead you this Lent? What wilderness will you allow God to shape you in? What might you do over the next 40 days to be intentional about depending on God? Where will you allow yourself to be stretched or to become famished...to be led to a place

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<sup>6</sup> Verse 2 and refrain as above

where the only escape, the only way through, the only way forward is by trusting wholly and completely in God?

I challenge you to find this place during Lent. And when you find yourself there, in the wilderness or in temptation, remember who you are in Christ. Remember your baptism. Remember you are God's beloved child. Like Jesus, live in the word of God and let it flow from your heart. And if you can't remember any of that, just stop and pray, "I need you, Lord." And know that God is nigh. Amen.