

**“Trying Not To Miss the Point”**  
**Luke 4:1–13**  
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Theologian Lori Brandt Hale tells a story about a conversation with her middle son when he was almost four about the narrative of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness we have read today from Luke 4 (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, pp. 44-48). He encountered this story during a Lenten children’s liturgy, learned something about its themes, and wanted to talk to his mother, a theologian, about them.

“Hey Mom,” he said, “what do you know about the devil?” What do you say to an almost four-year-old about this topic, especially if you are a theologian? Do you weigh in on various interpretations, talk about the difference between a literal character and the personification of evil, or avoid the question altogether? Like a wise professor and Mom, Lori said, “What do *you* know about the devil?”

“Well,” he said, “The devil talked to Jesus.” Good, she thought, he was paying attention. “The devil was mean,” he continued, and she pondered the use of that word. Perhaps the teacher used it to communicate the essence of evil without getting into its complexity. Interesting... but before she could think much further, her son leaned close to her and said very quietly, “If we were at a store, and you and Dad were in one aisle, and I was in another aisle, and...” his tone became even more hushed, “there was candy...” He paused for effect. “The devil would say, ‘You should take some!’”

Mom didn’t know whether to be amazed at how well her son retold the story or be concerned about the focus on the personified tempter and temptation, as opposed to Jesus and his faithfulness, but as she pondered these issues, she realized that maybe he understood enough for now. So, she said, “Honey, if we were at a store, and Dad and I were in one aisle, and you were in another, and there was candy, and the devil said, ‘You should take some!’ What would you say back to the devil?” A genuinely sweet smile lit up his face, as he replied, “Oh! I would say thank you!”

Lori Brandt Hale concludes that it is not surprising that a child so young would miss the point; we miss the point all the time. The story is more about Jesus than the devil, but who do we remember most? The temptations or tests — from the Greek *peirasmos* — are about not just desirable things Jesus isn't supposed to have but the very essence of his character and identity, his loyalty to God. And the most important message is not that Jesus is tempted but that he resists temptation and remains faithful, thus demonstrating that this is possible for us. In fact, we might rename this story, "The Faithfulness of Jesus."

It is a very familiar story, which can be dangerous because we think we know everything about it. Sometimes it is helpful with stories like this to try to set aside what we think we know and see it with fresh eyes. If we do, what are the implications for us?

We might start by examining the nature of Jesus' temptations again. This is not a one-off experience for Jesus to get out of the way. These are paradigmatic challenges to the very essence of Jesus' character and mission, challenges to how he will go about his ministry that he will face all the way to the cross.

We get a hint of this before reading any further in Luke because the story ends with these words, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." Until an opportune time... the testing is not over for Jesus. He is still wrestling with whether to do things God's way on the eve of his betrayal, as he prays for another way in the Garden of Gethsemane. The tests are just beginning now.

We know the basic details. One test is to turn stones into bread, to use his place to get ahead and to focus solely on physical needs. They matter immensely, but his mission includes more.

A second test is to accept a bribe — the devil will give him worldly authority, the ability to change things for the better, if he will shift his loyalty from God to the devil. The offer is enticing, he wants to make things better, but the price is too high. Nothing can come before God.

The third and final test is to jump off the pinnacle of the temple, something like the top of our steeple, only higher, allow God to send angels to rescue him, and thus prove how powerful he is. That would

get a crowd, and he could benefit from a crowd, but it's not how Jesus will work — he is no ordinary con man.

All three tests concern his character and identity. All three offer tools that might help him accomplish his mission. The very nature of temptation is that it offers something that appears enticing, at least on the surface. Jesus will not be bought for some momentary pleasure or distraction, but perhaps he will consider setting aside his piety to help the world he has come to redeem. That would be a kind of sacrifice.

But he does not buy what the devil is selling, he sees through the smoke and mirrors, he will not compromise his character and betray God. He will do the right thing in the right way, no matter what.

So, what are the implications for us? How are we tempted to betray our character, identity, and God? One immediate takeaway from the text is that as Jesus is tempted to be someone other than who he is, we are tempted to accept a different kind of messiah, one we are more comfortable with, a Jesus who fits our design, not God's.

This is happening on a large scale in our nation right now, though it is not a new phenomenon. We will hear more about this from Kristen Kobes Du Mez later this month, but in her book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, she documents a movement that began in the early 1900s. In response to the increasing role of women in society, there was a movement to develop a more manly image of men, think of some Arnold Schwarzenegger character. And since many Americans were Christian, there was a parallel move to develop a more manly image of Jesus.

The extremes to which this goes today would be hilarious if people didn't take them seriously. Many evangelicals seem embarrassed by a Jesus who talks about meekness and humility; who calls us to be peacemakers, not warmongers; who lays down his life for others rather than gathering an army and taking on the Romans. But this is the Jesus of scripture.

But the temptation to paint a different image of Jesus isn't just an alarming thing taking place in national life. We each in our own way can seek to avoid the teachings of Jesus that make us uncomfortable, and

in the process, develop a different image of him. The result is that we become different people than we might be, than God calls us to be.

We can also be tempted to get caught up in the spirit of this time and lose our identity. This is a time of incredible meanness. Politicians are mean, people on social media are mean, people in our workplaces and schools are mean. People on the roads have lost their minds in meanness, whipping in and out of traffic, cutting each other off, not just running red lights but ignoring lights that have been red for thirty seconds. I nearly lost my life a week ago to one such driver.

And it's not just meanness, this is a time of fundamental dishonesty, inventing language to mask outright lies, tearing down trust to gain power. What do we do in such a time? Bury our heads in the sand? It is tempting. Fight back with even greater meanness and deceit? It too is tempting. We may question whether it is possible to win a struggle playing fairly and kindly when others are not, but to give in to this spirit is to lose the struggle anyway and our souls in the process.

One further way we are tempted at the very core of our being is to give in to despair. There is so much happening that discourages us. How many hardworking people in critical roles who we know personally are losing their jobs? How many vulnerable people are losing basic services and supplies? What will happen to the courageous people of Ukraine and what will be our place in the world? And beyond the current madness, when the dust settles, however it turns out, how will we get along with each other with the kind of divisions we have?

It is easy to lose hope, but it lies at the heart of our identity as followers of Jesus that there is always hope. The God who cannot be defeated by a cross will not be defeated by the latest surge of hubris and foolishness. There will be a way forward, a light will shine in the darkness, and there will be work to do. We must not give in to despair.

But how do we hold on to hope? How do we retain our character and faith? How do we resist the temptation to reshape our image of Jesus and thus the nature of our lives? Well, how does Jesus do it? This is the most critical point of our story that we don't want to miss — not the devil's temptations but Jesus' faithfulness. How does he do it?

We might observe that he knows scripture, but then, so does the devil. Immersing ourselves in sacred texts will ground us, but we need to remain ever vigilant in seeking to discern what God is saying through scripture. A husband I worked with in another setting used scripture to suggest his wife should stay with and obey him even though he had threatened her with a gun. He wanted me to tell her so. I did not. Scripture can be a resource in our search for faithfulness, but we must resist using it for our purposes and allow God to guide us through it.

We could also note that while Jesus is in the wilderness by himself, ostensibly with no other people, he is not alone. The Spirit who descends on him in baptism leads him into the wilderness and somehow guides him through and out of it. The Spirit is with him. In like manner, we are not alone in any test or challenge. We have a Companion, Helper, Advocate, and Guide. We have help if only we will ask.

I think of a scene in C.S. Lewis's children's novel *The Horse and his Boy* in which the boy is riding through a mist in some mountains, somewhat anxious but frightened further by the sense that he is not alone. A Voice assures him this Other Presence is not hostile but rather a friend, guiding him, the great Aslan, a Christ figure. The Spirit of Christ is with us as we negotiate the misty mountains of testing and try to remain true to ourselves and God.

So, Jesus knows scripture, and he is not alone, but most of all, he knows who he is and Whose he is, and as a result, nothing can deter him from his path — not the devil, not crowds of people wanting a king, not even the threat of death — nothing! Martin Luther said that when he was tempted to forget who he was, he would say to himself, “But I am baptized!” I am a beloved child of God claimed in baptism through Christ. I am more than this, other than this, better than this!

So are we. We are more than the meanness and deceit, we are better than the tone of this time, we are followers of the one who never gave up but rather gave all for others.

That's the point we don't want to miss. Like Jesus, we are tempted mightily, tested in every way, but like Jesus, we have the ability to say “no thanks” to the candy and “yes” to whom God calls us to be.