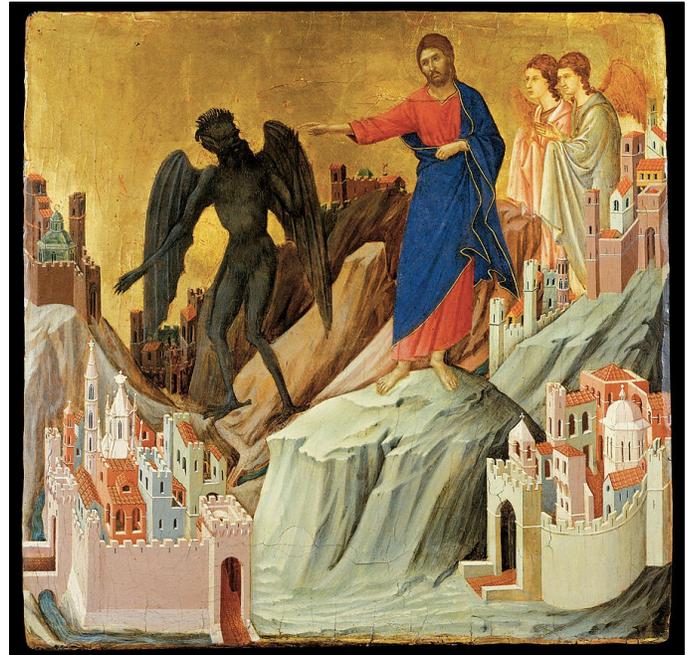


Scripture in Context

The Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness

The lectionary is a series of scripture passages, read Sunday-by-Sunday over a three-year period. If you are anywhere near a “regular” in worship, you can anticipate hearing the New Testament in its entirety and significant portions of the Old Testament with the Psalms appearing separately.

Alas, there is a problem: when scripture is divided into bits and pieces we can miss the full scope of the passage; the great canvas of scripture can elude us.



Each Gospel – Matthew (4:1-11), Mark (1:12-13), Luke (4:1-13) – tells a slightly different story of Jesus’ experience in the wilderness. John says nothing at all about Jesus’ temptation.

The wilderness experience appears to be an important story for Matthew, Mark, and Luke, those books we call the “synoptic gospels” (for ‘together’ + ‘see’). Clearly, there is a connection and interaction between them. It is also clear each gospel writer has their own “take” or understanding regarding Jesus’ forty-day trial in the wilderness.

The Greek word “tempt” means “to try” or “to test.” There is a neutral quality here with a good intent to prove the true nature of a person; or evil, to incite or push a person into wrongdoing or sin. That tension or ambiguity makes for a nuanced reading of the text.

The three synoptic gospels hold in common the following points:

1. Jesus faced temptation;
 2. It was in a wilderness setting;
 3. The temptation endured for forty days;
 4. Jesus was tempted by Satan, the Devil, the Tempter;
 5. Jesus was directed and/or sustained by the Spirit.
- Mark is startlingly economical in his telling, there are only two verses. Verse 12 begins with “immediately.” Mark is eager to get on the story. The Greek word for “immediately” (*euthys*) is used forty-two times in the gospel, eleven times in the first chapter alone.
 - Luke’s telling is the most expansive with some thirteen verses. In Luke, it takes two trials before the Devil resorts to using scripture to fine-hone his test - the third trial.
 - In Matthew’s eleven verses, a scripture war develops between Jesus and his tempter; it is a thrust and parry of scripture.

In Mark's brief account, the fasting and the three challenges are omitted (he does throw in some "wild beasts" for color). Matthew and Luke both present a dramatic dialogue between the tempter and tempted.

It is not by chance that Jesus reputes the Devil's proposals with quotes from Deuteronomy 6:13, 6:16, and 8:3. For the readers, the references from Deuteronomy would easily recall the wilderness experience in Exodus experience of the people of Israel in their forty years of wandering. There are three events of the Exodus in which the Israelites were put to the test; they failed with each test. Jesus is being compared to them: where Israel of old missed the mark, here Jesus succeeds in meeting each temptation.

Matthew and Mark end their account with angels in ministry; Luke is silent on the angels, saying only that the Devil "left him for awhile." In this foreshadowing, Luke alerts us of things to come.

So, What Can this Mean for Us?

Keith Nickle suggests a dynamic of temptation that is universal and very contemporary: our temptation to adjust the Gospel to what is comfortable for us.

"The contest [between Jesus and the devil] revolved around traditional but inadequate and incomplete messianic anticipations of the Jewish people. The devil challenged Jesus to reduce his Messiahship so that it would conform with their expectations, and thereby become perverted.

"Each temptation assailed Jesus not at a place of weakness and vulnerability, but at the point of his greatest strength – his compassion, his commitment to God, his faith. The Devil's challenges represent the allure of popular but shallow enthusiasm

"The diabolic dimensions of the temptations cannot be underestimated. What the devil demanded of Jesus was not heinous debauchery, depravity, or outrage. [On the contrary, the point is that] desires that seem proper become just as sinful when fulfilled and an improper context. The devil sought to induce Jesus to secure [what any of us might call] a legitimate end through illegitimate means.

[This helps us] "to broaden our understanding of the extent, scope, and duration of Jesus' temptations. As portrayed in this story, the temptations really serve as a synopsis of the entire spiritual journey of Jesus as he ran-up against the allure of popular acclaim.

"Without trivializing ... Jesus' wilderness encounter, it is nonetheless appropriate to point out that all Christians find themselves struggling with similar temptations to dilute the quality – and even exchange – the object of their commitment....

"There are times when we too, in response to the call of God are tempted to:

- be satisfied with only an adequate offering rather than the best we can offer;
- succumb to impatience and seek to accomplish God's purpose by means that are alien to God's character;
- trivialize God by taking shortcuts to a success that is perceived as desired."

The Gospel of Luke: Proclaiming God's Royal Rule,
Keith F. Nickle, Westminster Press, 2000. Pg 39-40

THE TEMPTATION ON THE MOUNTAIN — Today's English Version - The Good News Bible

| Matthew 4:1-11 | Mark 1:12-13 | Luke 4:1-13 |
|---|---|--|
| <p>¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."</p> <p>⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"</p> <p>⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"</p> <p>⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"</p> <p>⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."</p> <p>¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"</p> <p>¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The Temptation of Jesus</i></p> <p>¹² At once the Spirit made him go into the desert, ¹³where he stayed forty days, being tempted by Satan. Wild animals were there also, but angels came and helped him.</p> <p><i>Comment:</i> <i>Everything seems to happen very quickly in Mark. The Greek word for "immediately" (euthys) is used forty-two times in the gospel, eleven times in the first chapter alone. After his brief telling of the temptation, Mark rushes on to the first words from Jesus: "the time is fulfilled!" (1:15)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry</i></p> <p>¹⁴ After John had been put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee and preached the Good News from God. He said: ¹⁵ "The right time has come, and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!"</p> | <p>⁴ Jesus returned from the Jordan full of the Holy Spirit and was led by the Spirit into the desert, ² where he was tempted by the Devil for forty days. In all that time he ate nothing, so that he was famished when it was over.</p> <p>³ The Devil said to him, "If you are God's Son, order this stone to turn into bread."</p> <p>⁴ But Jesus answered, "The scripture says, 'Human beings cannot live on bread alone.'"</p> <p>⁵ Then the Devil took him up and in a second showed him all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ "I will give you all this power and all this wealth," the Devil told him. "It has all been handed over to me, and I can give it to anyone I choose. ⁷ All this will be yours, then, if you worship me."</p> <p>⁸ Jesus answered, "The scripture says, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!'"</p> <p>⁹ Then the Devil took him to Jerusalem and set him on the highest point of the Temple, and said to him, "If you are God's Son, throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For the scripture says, 'God will order his angels to take good care of you.' ¹¹ It also says, 'They will hold you up with their hands so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones.'"</p> <p>¹² But Jesus answered, "The scripture says, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"</p> <p>¹³ When the Devil finished tempting Jesus in every way, he left him for a while.</p> |