

The Holy Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness where he was tested by the devil for 40 days. That's why we stop eating fudge brownies or we stop smoking cigars or we give up our evening nightcap. You know, when I was a kid, those two notions seemed more connected to me, but now the way these fit together is becoming increasingly obscure for me—maybe it's the same for you. How does what happened to Jesus lead us to make more New Year's resolutions?

There is a certain Sunday School kind of sensibility there. I get that because Jesus sacrificed so much for us that we should practice sacrificing for others. That seems fine for children. But it's time for an adult version. As always, our Gospel bears fruit rather nicely with a bit of prayerful scrutiny.

This passage is the final episode in Luke's introduction to Jesus' public ministry. There is no question who Jesus *is* at this point in Luke's Gospel, which is why it is helpful to hear the original Greek that says, "*Since* you are God's son..." not "*If* you are...." What's being tested is not *who* Jesus is, because even the devil is willing to concede that. What's being tested is *how* God's son should act.

And yes, these are *tests*, not temptations. What the devil offers Jesus are not temptations like another slice of pecan pie or another hour on Facebook when you should be working. The devil's tests are not temptations to behave in ways that are somehow detrimental. No, these are tests to see whether even good options can lead the Son of God away from putting God first.

You see, the Sunday School version is useful to children who need to learn how to behave in ways that are healthy and good, and to how not to behave in ways that are harmful. Life is a bit more complex for adults who can recognize that sometimes the choices are between two or more actions that all look good. So an adult version of Lent does well to move beyond being "good girls and boys."

An adult version might invite us to contemplate how we ought to act in light of the gift and grace of our identity as children of God. Notice how each of the devil's tests seeks to erode and undercut Jesus' confidence in his relationship with God and, as a result, to act in a way that is counter to his truest identity.

The devil's first test is to say to Jesus, who hungers after 40 days of fasting, "command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Notice: the test is not "make this stone into bread," but "*speak* this stone into bread" in much the same way that God spoke creation into being in Genesis. Surely, someone with God's power could not only satisfy their own physical hunger, but the hunger of many. Such a person could become a new Moses for the people.

Aware of the devil's tactics, Jesus responds by quoting the scripture that served Moses. Deuteronomy 8:3 reads, "[God] humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Jesus knew that to act in the place of God the Creator by commanding a stone to become bread would not just be for him to act as something other than human. It would also be an act that showed that Jesus did not trust that God would provide.

The second test is a bit more transparent. The devil offers Jesus the powers of the Empire in return for his allegiance and worship. The Greek word translated as "world" in our reading refers primarily to the Roman empire rather than to the entire planet. Remember that God looked at all that God created and said, "It is very good!" The only part of creation that has been given over to the devil is the heavy-handed Empire that rules by fear and force. The rulers of Empire have granted their allegiance and devotion to the personification of evil rather than to the God of love and justice.

Given the heavy-handed oppression of the Roman Empire, surely a regime change putting Jesus in charge could only be good. But the cost is too high. Jesus knows that his allegiance can only be given to God. And so, once again, Jesus draws from Deuteronomy: "The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear."

Finally, the devil leads Jesus to Jerusalem, the place where Jesus' earthly ministry will end with his murder, burial and resurrection. Luke uses the same verb here that was used of a holy spirit by which Jesus "was being led" into the wilderness at the beginning of the passage. The adult exploration of this story

allows the possibility that the Holy Spirit is still leading Jesus, even while the devil is testing Jesus. The third tests proposes that since Jesus is the Son of God, he should test to see if God really is trustworthy. Once again, Jesus responds from Deuteronomy: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test...”

In each case, the devil seeks to undermine Jesus’ confidence in both God and himself. In completing these tests, Jesus relies on the sacred story of Israel to affirm not only that he is a part of that story, but that he is a trusting child of God.

Jesus refused to speak stones into bread, but to this day he feeds the hungry on more than bread. He refused the power of Empire, but *to this day* his proclamations of God’s kingdom of justice, peace and mercy are more powerful than all the politics of fear and force. Jesus refused to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple, but to this day and to the end of time, his obedience to God even unto death on a cross has conquered the power of death.

These were the tests presented to the Son of God. These are not the tests that confront you and me. Make no mistake: our trust in God—our trust in our identity as children of God— *is* being tested. Even now. Tested by people and systems that seek to shift our allegiance, trust and confidence away from God, and toward some substitute that promises a more secure reality.

Consider our current political environment. Notice how people running for office promote insecurity and fear in us. Some want us to be terrified of Muslims, while others want us to fear Wall Street, and still others raise alarms about immigrants and joblessness, about low wages or high taxes, the wealthy, the poor. The targets shift, but the message is the same: “You should be afraid,” they insist, “because you are either already a victim or you are on the way to becoming a victim. That is who you are,” they tell us, “or it soon will be and the only thing you can do about it is let me,” each of them says, “let *me* have your allegiance—elect me and I’ll protect you from all the bad.”

That’s a test of our fidelity. But you and I are not victims or, perhaps more accurately, victimhood is *not* our identity. So why act that way? We are children of God. God loves each of us and all of us enough to send God’s Son into the world to live and die as one of us so that we can know that God is *with* us and *for*

us forever. God raised Jesus from the dead to demonstrate that God's love is more powerful than all the apathy, fear and hatred in the world—more powerful than death itself. So why not act that way?

During Lent, we can become engrossed in self-denial, sacrifice and penance. And Lent is a good time to consider these things, but what's being tested is how God's children should act. To transcend our childhood responses to that testing requires us to get beyond ourselves. The Christian mystic John Chrysostom wrote this: "No matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor, and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great."

I invite you, then, to move deeper into Lent by seeking to more fully embody the love and grace of God poured out for all of us on the cross. Pope Frances has suggested that if we're going to fast from anything this Lent that we consider fasting beyond candy or alcohol—that we fast instead from indifference towards others. That feels like how God's children should act—to allow God during Lent to move us closer to loving others like God loves us.

Whatever else you decide to give up this Lent, consider also giving up indifference and fear. Give them up to make more room in your heart for feasting on love—the love of God that magnifies and animates the gift and grace of our identity as children of God. No one is excluded from God's love, but not everyone realizes that. Who is it in your life that needs to experience God's grace in you?