

**“Into the Fire: To Universal Acclaim”**

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March 14, 2021

*When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*

*When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

*And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”*

*Luke 4:13-22*

The past three weeks we’ve been looking at Christ’s temptations in the desert, moving bit by bit through Luke chapter 4. This season of Lent takes a lot of cues from Jesus’s forty days in the wilderness, a time of trial and hardship, and as a church, during Lent it’s like we’re saying, “Jesus, as we follow you, we too enter into this time of preparation, looking ahead to the cross.”

Now though, even though we continue in the forty days of Lent, we’ve come to the end of Christ’s forty days in the wilderness. Obviously the story keeps going, and Jesus’s public ministry begins, and he leaves the wilderness behind. But in a sense, his time of trial and temptation may not have ever truly ended.

Slight adjustment to what’s printed in the bulletin. I’m thinking it’d be good for us to start back one verse earlier, so we’ll begin in v. 13, reading through v. 22. Hear now the Word of God.

[Read passage.]

Will you pray with me?

**Holy God for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.**

Three strikes and you’re out, is usually the way we think things should go. Seems fair. If you take three cracks at something and miss on each one, it seems reasonable that you’d take a step back, gracefully bow out.

Sounds like that's what the devil's doing here in v. 13. He had taken three good shots at Jesus, tempted him with food, with authority, and with spiritual notoriety, each of them appealing to a different aspect of Jesus's purpose. There might have been a lot appealing about what he was offering—they were temptations after all—but Jesus shut them all down. And if each temptation represented a quicker, easier way for Jesus to accomplish what he had come to do—or what some might have understood what he had come to do—then he showed just what kind of Messiah he intended to be. When given the chance to miraculously turn stone into bread, feeding himself and perhaps also the multitudes, he doesn't. When given the chance to take up authority over all the kingdoms of the world, he doesn't. When given the chance to bring a religious spectacle from atop the temple in Jerusalem, he doesn't. He refutes those temptations, rejects the devil, and now v. 13 tells us the devil, after swinging and missing three times, is bowing out. "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time."

In other words, the devil goes to wait in the long grass for Jesus. Wait until he's at a more vulnerable spot maybe. "Until an opportune time," it says. Here's the thing, though, Luke never tells us of another direct confrontation between Jesus and devil. Never takes place. You'd think just from the standpoint of story structure that if you have this showdown at the beginning of the story, you'd have a second showdown toward the end, a rematch of sorts. And that's why in some traditions, it's thought that the devil returned to tempt Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, or maybe while he was being beaten and scourged, or maybe while he was being tried, or maybe while he was being crucified. You would think that would be as opportune a time as you could get. Impossible to say, really. Luke doesn't really tell us.

But as we look at what comes next, as we look at what happens with Jesus *after* his time of trial and temptation in the wilderness, I'm starting to wonder whether the devil didn't wait around for very long at all. I'm starting to wonder whether he got right back into the game.

And why? Because maybe the devil figured out that Jesus when he was in hardship wasn't going to cave to anything, but what if Jesus was riding high?

It's been said that the times of greatest spiritual threat aren't when you're in the depths of the pit, but rather when you're riding the highs of success or notoriety, when you've arrived. And why is that? It's in the depths that we're perhaps more likely to realize how so far in over our heads we are, how so in need of deliverance and reliance upon God we are. For how many of us has this past year been one of the hardest we've had to face, but then with that hardship, how many of us have felt a renewed focus on the things that really matter?

Frances and I were talking with one of our members just last night who shared that this past year of not being able to do so much has made her become so grateful for more simplicity in life, for not filling life up with things that don't matter in the grand scheme of things. Sometimes it takes the hardship to bring that out.

But what if we're riding high? When we're on top of the world, how inclined are we to hear some kind of call to correction, or a call to repentance, or even just a call to turn to God? Honestly, if everything is going well, why mess with a good thing?

Things started going very well for Jesus when he came back from the wilderness. He returns to Galilee and begins his ministry, traveling around, teaching in the synagogues, town after town, one after another, and each one it seems has the same reaction: they love him. He is praised by everyone, Luke tells us.

Even when he comes home, when he comes back to Nazareth where he grew up, it seems his reputation comes with him. He goes to the synagogue like he had in all those other towns, only this one was likely all too

familiar to him. It's likely most of the faces recognize him as the kid that grew up down the street, but now he's back in a very different sort of setting. He's invited at the synagogue not just to read but also to teach. So, he takes the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, unrolls it to chapter 61—kind of strange to think of unrolling to a certain part of the Bible rather than flipping pages, but that's how they did it—and reads this passage.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

It's an encouraging text—all about the anointed Messiah and something called the year of jubilee, when everything resets, when debts are cancelled, when property goes back to original owners, but it's also a provocative, especially in what Jesus does next.

He sits down—and this is how we know he was invited to teach, not just read, as sitting down was the traditional teaching stance then. He sits down, and everyone is on pins and needles waiting to hear what he would say about this passage. All eyes are fixed on him, and he says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” That's a big deal, what he said. He's claiming that this prophetic word has come true, meaning that longing for God's anointed, for the Messiah, for that time of favor and blessing upon the land and the people, was fulfilled right now in him. Kind of a big deal. Jesus stepped out boldly.

But it was a hit! Everyone loved it. “All spoke so well of him and were amazed at the gracious word that came from his mouth,” Luke tells us. In fact, this whole time, Luke seems to be going out of his way to let us know just how popular Jesus was. Earlier Luke tells us Jesus was praised by everyone, and now everyone speaks well of him and is amazed by his words. Jesus is riding high. What issue could there possibly be with that? He's endured his hardship, now he's started his ministry, and it's going well. He paid his dues. Take a bow, for goodness' sake, Jesus, you've arrived, toast of the town.

What's so wrong with popularity anyway? What's so wrong with being well liked? Isn't that supposed to be a good thing, to be well liked? It's good when people like you, wouldn't you say? I mean, it's at least better than if people don't like you, right?

Let me ask it this way. How effective would Jesus have been if right out of the gates he was just a doom and gloom killjoy who was insufferable to be around? Not too effective at all.

How effective would any of us be at what we do? I mean, if you're a teacher, how good of a teacher can you be if all of your students simply can't stand you and won't listen to a word you say? Or if you're on a sports team, how good of a teammate can you be if the rest of your teammates won't give you the time of day? Or if you're a staff person in a business place, how good a co-worker would you be if your customers and the rest of your colleagues all think you're awful and don't want to engage with you at all? Or if you're a preacher, how good of a preacher can you be if all of your congregation tunes you out? What's so bad about popularity?

Nothing I suppose. Nothing wrong with being well liked. But what happens when you start to crave it, when you start to need it, when your sense of self-worth and purpose is tied to it?

Put another way, how good of a teacher can you be if you're constantly worried about whether your students like you? How good of a teammate can you be if you're more worried about being voted team captain than about practicing and playing hard? How good of a staff member can you be if you're more worried about your colleagues' approval than about your effectiveness together as a team? And how good of a preacher can you be if you rely on words of praise after a Sunday sermon in order to put wind in your sails the rest of the week?

The answer is, you won't do your job well, once we start to crave popularity.

No, I don't think the devil waited too long before reintroducing temptation back into Jesus's world. It's just now, the temptation is to embrace that popularity that his ministry has brought him, and then maybe he'd start to crave it, and then maybe he'd start to seek it out, and then maybe he'd dull the edges on what he would say, just so people might like him better, and then maybe he wouldn't be so mindful about doing what he came to do, so long as he was well liked. No, I don't think the devil waited too long.

The fourth temptation, you might call it. "The people love you, Jesus. You're a folk hero. Now, just embrace it. Take a bow. You wouldn't want to say anything to upset your adoring fans, would you?"

That can be all too tempting for all of us, can't it? To be well liked is one thing, even a good thing. But to let whether we are liked determine our worth will only lead us, in whatever it is we do, to constantly seek approval and affirmation in something other than God.

But that's not what Jesus did. He was well liked. Luke makes that clear. But that wasn't what was driving him. He had come to accomplish something, and he tells us what it was. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." There's so much just in that passage from Isaiah, but in citing it Jesus is telling us that his public approval rating means far less to him than his work, anointed by the Spirit, as God's chosen Messiah, proclaiming a time of jubilee, the year of the Lord's favor, a time when captives are set free, when the poor hear good news. And he's saying that starts now.

There might be some for whom that truly was good news. There might be others who would have preferred things go on the way they were going. But no matter his popularity or lack thereof, Christ would not stray from what he had come to do in the Lord's name: a work of salvation, a work of grace, and that path was set before him, whether he was loved or loathed.

May we follow with the same faith.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.