

Until an Opportune Time
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Good morning, Church! I want to read a passage of scripture today that is a very beautiful passage and it's a very sacred passage, because this passage had to come to us through the words of Jesus himself. He had to share this story with his disciples and they, in turn, have passed it down to us. This is taken from Luke chapter 4, beginning with verse 1, the temptations of Christ.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live by bread alone.'" The devil led him up on a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. He said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.'" The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.
May God bless the reading of His Word.

In a time not too long ago, in a land not too far away, I owned my last dog. Hopefully, not my very last dog, but the last one. And there's some debate as to who owned whom. Her name was Daisy; Daisy May, when she was in trouble. Daisy was a German Shorthaired Pointer, a bird dog. And she and I spent countless hours in the Boise Valley fields and byways and in the Owyhee mountains, south of the Boise Valley, chasing quail and chucker and pheasant. She got to the place where she could understand me better than some of you can. She would do anything I asked her to do if she understood me, except one thing. There was a temptation she could not resist: deer. If we ran into a deer, I could tell immediately what it was, because she would literally cringe. She would go, "Oh, I'm going to get in trouble. I'm going to get in trouble. I'm going to get in trouble." Whoosh, gone! And she would be gone for half an hour, 45 minutes, or an hour. She would come back with her tongue hanging out or her tail between her legs and going, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I know I shouldn't have..."

Temptation. She had hers, I have mine, you have yours. They're unique to us. What's a temptation for me may not be a temptation for you. What's a temptation for you may not be a temptation for me. They're unique. And, trust me when I tell you, Satan is not going to tempt you where you're strong but rather where you're weak. These temptations were unique to Jesus. There are great milestones in Jesus' life. For instance, when he was 12, we know that he had already come to the place where he understood his unique relationship with the Father. There is his baptism, where the Spirit of God descended on him in bodily form like a dove and a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Immediately after His baptism, the Spirit of God led him into the desert to be tempted and tested for a period of forty days, for a long time. That seems a strange way to start a ministry, but really it's not. Before you begin any great

task, you must decide how you're going to proceed. And for forty days, for a long period of time, Jesus wrestled with the devil in the wilderness, trying to decide how he would lead people to God. How would he do that? There are a number of ways to go about it. How would he proceed? And he was tempted and tested. This story comes to us from Jesus himself and these temptations are unique to Christ himself. I don't know about you, but I haven't been tempted lately to turn stones into bread. That's not a temptation for me. Now, I have turned some bread into stone. I've done that. But turning stones into bread, that's not a temptation for me. So, Jesus wrestled with this for forty days. Let me pause here for just a moment. That number forty occurs in the New Testament and the Old Testament alike. You can take that literally. It is just fine to do that. But forty is significant if forty stands for a significantly long period of time. Don't get hung up on the literalness. You can take it that way if you would like. But it's like me saying, "I haven't seen you in a coon's age." It means a long period of time. Or, "That wouldn't happen again in a million years." It's a long period of time. Forty stands for a significantly long period of time. However long it was, Jesus wrestled with how to win people to God for some time.

The first temptation: "If you are the Son of God, then turn these stones into bread. Bribe them. You want people to follow you? Give them what they want. Feed them. Heal them. Give them what they want. Change the circumstances of their life and they will follow you in droves. Give them material things." I was surprised by a survey I saw, about 15 years ago, of Americans. Whether people were making \$10,000 a year or \$100,000 a year, they almost uniformly said if they were making ten percent more, they'd be happy. That's the thing about material stuff; it doesn't satisfy for very long. Now, before I make this next statement, let me ask you: please don't send me any emails, don't throw anything at me, let me finish. Listen carefully. The task of Christianity, the primary task of Christianity, is to produce new people, not new circumstances. Our task is to change hearts, not change circumstances. Now, should we put our voice and our weight behind making the world a better place? You bet we should and we are! But the primary task of the Christian faith is to not make new circumstances but to make new people. Now, if the Lord tarries and I get to stay here for a long time, which I hope will be the case, you're going to hear this many, many times. If you change the heart, the behind will follow. Right? If you change the heart, the behind will follow. If you change the heart, if somebody has a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit is in their heart and their life, you cannot keep them from feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and housing the homeless and visiting those that are hurting and trying to make the world a better place. You can't keep them from doing it. It is hardwired into us. But our task is to change people, and the people change the environment. The stated purpose of The United Methodist Church is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world," and I get it, I agree with it, but I'd like to rewrite it. The purpose of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. The disciples transform the world. The primary purpose of the church is to make disciples and the disciples in turn transform the world. When Jesus was deciding how to win people to God, he decided to try to change their hearts, not their circumstances. And if that was Jesus' task, it's our task, too. The church gets in trouble when it thinks its primary task is to change circumstances and it forgets to change hearts. Our primary task is to change hearts, to make disciples of Jesus Christ, and the disciples transform the world.

The second temptation. I always get questions about this. "How in the world did Satan show Jesus all of the nations of the world?" I don't know. Remember, this is unique to Jesus. He could see it all. I can't. And the next question I always get is, "Well, wait a minute, whoa, whoa, whoa. I thought God is in control." Yes, God is in control but He turned Satan loose. And if you look back at history, no matter what point in history, no matter how you slice it, Satan has done pretty well for himself. And he says, "You know, all of this is mine. All this is mine. I'll give it to you. I'll give it to you. Forget about all this serving and sacrifice and suffering. Just compromise a little bit. If you will worship me, just this one time, I'll give it to you. You don't have to do all that serving and all that sacrificing and all that suffering. And forget about the cross. I'll give it to you. Just compromise. Don't set your standards so high. Take the easy road." Easy believe-ism, something Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." So, well, you know, we're not tempted to worship Satan. Yeah? Are we tempted to compromise? (And it got real quiet in here). Our society is enamored with the way, the formula, the secret, the fast way, the quick fix. That wouldn't bleed over into the church, would it? Jesus is the way and Jesus' way is the way of service, the way of sacrifice, and the way of suffering. But, too often, we look for the quick fix, we look for the easy way, we look for the formula. And I want to tell you that churches and Christians individually grow by blood, sweat and tears; the blood of Christ and the sweat and tears of those who follow him. There's not a quick fix, there's not an easy road, there's not a secret way. Jesus' way is the way of service, the way of sacrifice, the way of suffering. God does not concern Himself with making our way or your way easy. Jesus committed himself to the right road, not the easy road. And that is our road, too. This church, and you and I as individuals, will grow by blood, sweat, and tears. Ours is the road of service, sacrifice and suffering, just as Jesus' road was. There's not a quick fix.

The third temptation. Satan takes Jesus to Jerusalem, has him stand on the highest point of the temple. The temple backed up to the Kidron Valley and from the highest point of the temple to the bottom of the Kidron Valley is a 450-foot drop. Satan says to Jesus, "Jump! You got the power. It won't hurt you. You can do it. Wow them. Impress them. Jump off the highest point of the temple, bounce on the ground and get up and walk off. They'll be impressed."

I don't bring this monstrosity (a cellphone) to church very often on Sunday mornings, because I don't want it buzzing in my pocket. I want to be able to give you my undivided attention on Sundays. But I'm using it as a sermon example today. I've done that on many occasions. The fact of the matter is, I got this phone because I used my other phone in a sermon illustration. I was talking to my kids. I used to carry a flip phone for years. I mean years. And I pulled it out to my kids one Sunday and I said, "Do you know what this is?" And they looked at that and went, "No." That's why I knew I needed a new phone. And so, I got a new phone and found out something. Y'all remember the first space shuttle? Y'all remember that we had built a space shuttle and it had the ability to go into space and come back and go back. We had a re-usable spacecraft for the first time in history. It was impressive. It was awe-inspiring. That first space shuttle had one megabyte of RAM computer strength. One. This cell phone has 64 gigabytes of RAM computing power. There's 1000 megabytes in every gigabyte. This cell phone has 64,000 times the computing power of the first space shuttle. Now, how many of y'all got one of these? Huh? Do you pull it out of your pocket and go, "Woo!" This is not impressive, is it? It's not impressive anymore. That's the thing about sensationalism. It takes more and more and more and more and more. And Jesus rejected power and glory and sensationalism and instead adopted modeling sacrificial love as how he would

win people to God. What is exciting today is old hat tomorrow. Jesus chose to show them what love looked like, lived out, not sensationalism. And if that was Jesus' road, that's our road, too.

You have been tempted in the past and you will be tempted in the future. That is a fact. What remains to be seen is, how will you respond? We often talk about being a witness for Jesus Christ and we talk about training to be a witness for Jesus Christ and that's all well and good. But the bottom line is, if you are a Christian, you are going to be a witness. You may be a bad one, but you're going to be one. And how you respond to the temptations of your life will determine what type of a witness you are, whether a good one or a bad one. How will you be a witness? How will you win people to Christ? This is what Jesus wrestled with. How will you be an example? Ours is the way of service, of sacrifice, and if necessary, suffering, not power and glory. Our task is not primarily to change circumstances, but to change hearts. And people whose hearts have been changed will change the circumstances. Our task is to change hearts, to work hard, and to model sacrificial love. Do not fall into the temptation of looking for the quick fix, the easy way, the popular path, the shortcut. Those are temptations of Satan, just as surely as the temptations Jesus underwent in the desert. Don't look for the easy path, the quick fix, the easy way, or the popular path. Jesus chose God's path. It was hard, it was difficult, and it cost him his life. But we are here today because of it. I don't know about you but I want to live a life that will last, that will have an impact, that will impact people into the future, not just the sensationalism of the moment. And that is Jesus' challenge for us today; to choose God's way, not the easy way. Let's pray.

Lord, too often we are led astray by temptation, the formula, the secret, the fast way, the quick fix. Lord, remind us that Jesus is the way. And his way is a way of service, a way of sacrifice, and when necessary, a way of suffering. And help us to choose the right way so that we might win people to You, too. In Christ's name, amen.