

¹ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.' "

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' "

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'

¹¹ and

'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "

¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

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Grace to you this morning, and peace, from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, who is that light and life in the world. Amen.

Some, perhaps many of you, recall that I have said, as I was taught in seminary, there are two types of sermon: The first type is the sermon of comfort, the word that reassures, the word that declares mercy. The second type of sermon is the word of challenge. As you may have guessed, today, I'm going to bring you the latter, by raising a question I mentioned at the beginning of the service: What does it mean to tempt God?

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Now, the good news is that Jesus helps us answer this question in our gospel reading for today, specifically verse 12: "Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, it says, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.' Jesus responds, 'It is said, do not put the Lord your God to the test.' (Quoting here Deuteronomy 16.)

That's our preliminary answer. According to Jesus, tempting God means "not putting God to the test." Not putting God to the test.

But then, if you're like me, (and I would like to offer my full and total sympathies, if you are; to live in *this* head, in *this* mind, and be as neurotic as I am, is not always fun, even though it can be mildly sometimes entertaining) – if you are like me in any way, another question arises, and that is this: What does it mean "to put God to the test"?

For an answer, we turn briefly to Martin Luther.

The year was 1527. A plague, one of three that would sweep through Wittenberg during Luther's lifetime, took hold, and cost many people their lives. Luther counseled his fellow people in Wittenberg to use common sense in a treatise he writes called "Whether the Christian May Flee from a Deadly Plague," or, as I like to term it, "To Flee or not to Flee." In this treatise, Luther advised those Christians who were not necessary in caring for the sick to leave without a guilty conscience. To leave without a guilty conscience. Use common sense. Why should they risk their lives if they are not absolutely needed? Only those who are necessary, Luther says – physicians, nurses, spiritual caregivers – should stay to care for the victims, which, as you might have guessed, Luther himself did.

But there are others who stayed for all the wrong reasons; people who defied common sense, and Martin Luther, not surprisingly, had choice words for them. "These are people," Luther writes, "who are much too rash and reckless. Tempting God, and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague, they disdain the use of medicines." Sound familiar? "They do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but light-heartedly make sport of it, and wish to prove how independent they are. They say that it is God's judgment; if God wants to protect them, he can do so without medicine, without medicines or our carefulness. This is not trusting God, but tempting God. God has created medicines, and provided us with a brain with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body, so that we can live in good health."

What then does it mean to tempt God or put God to the test? For Luther, I think the answer here is pretty clear. It means not having God prove Godself by intervening or performing a miracle. That is putting God to the test.

Another way to state it is that to doubt God's reliability is wrong, especially when we don't think God acts according to our expectations. So again, to doubt God's reliability, unless God acts according to our expectations, or what we think God should do in place of doing it ourselves.

So how does this play out in the ministry of Jesus? Well, we know when tempted by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus is tempted to undermine his ministry. He's tempted to assume political power; and he's tempted to idolatry.

We know when Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he does not succumb. Instead of forcing God to intervene, on his terms, Jesus places his faith, his trust, in God. It is this faith, this trust, that enables and empowers Jesus to endure the temptations.

Jesus, in short, passes the test – but this won't be his last. In my opinion, the practice that in the wilderness occurs here, sets up the *biggest* temptation Jesus will face, according to Luke 22, where – listen closely – instead of turning back in fear, Jesus *turns toward Jerusalem* in the name of life, in the name of justice, and (with all due props to Bono from U2) in the name of love, knowing he will likely pay the price with his life.

This, I believe, is the most decisive moment in the Jesus story. He could have said simply, “God will intervene. I don't need to do anything. God will do this for me,” – but, that is putting God to the test.

No wonder he prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.” Does that language sound familiar? For those of you who know the story of Socrates, it's possibly an allusion to his death. Socrates, who was charged for corrupting the youth of Athens, drank from a cup of poison hemlock. Luke, the only gentile author in the New Testament, may very well be referring to Socrates here, comparing him with Jesus.

So again, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, yet not my will, but yours be done.” Some versions of Luke even add that “In anguish, Jesus prayed more earnestly, and sweat fell like great drops of blood to the ground.”

Now the good news, the great news, the incredible news, is that Jesus did it. He could have turned back and compromised everything for which he lived and taught, but with tremendous courage, radical courage, Jesus stood up to the powers that be, both the religious authorities of the Judeans as well as the Roman Empire.

And here's even more good news: Jesus empowers each one of us to do the same. Our Hymn of the Day, an African American spiritual written in the context of 19th century slavery, expresses this desire for His help powerfully, in trials and tribulations, many of which we simply cannot imagine African Americans endured.

The request is, “I want Jesus to walk with me.” And the good news, great news, the incredible news, is that he does. A black theologian, James Cone, says, “Had it not been for the religion of Jesus, Black people in America would not have survived the institution of slavery.” Jesus accompanies those who call on him.

Dear Friends in Christ, we are living in a time of great fear and trepidation, a time where tyranny hovers over our nation like a dark cloud pregnant with rain, a kind of rain that is terror and injustice. Will we put God to the test by doing nothing, expecting God to magically intervene on our behalf – or will we do God's work in

the world and walk with Jesus, by speaking out, and standing up for the most vulnerable in our society, even in the smallest of ways: for the neglected veteran, for the poor, for the refugee, for the migrant, for the widow and for the orphan?

I have never believed God magically intervenes to fix our problems. That version of God, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed at the end of his life, is dead. I do believe, however, in a God *who empowers us* to face these problems ourselves.

God has given us hands and feet, which are God's in the world, so that we may do God's work. The question is, whether we will respond as Jesus did, standing up in the face of principalities and powers that undermine the well-being of the least of these, language of which Jesus uses in Matthew 25.

May God grant each of us, each of you and me, strength to undertake even the smallest acts of courage to speak out on behalf of those who have no voice, and to support organizations and nonprofits like Lutheran Community Services Northwest that do the same.

In Jesus' name,
Amen.