

Pop Quiz

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 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. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 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, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

When I was in junior high, my algebra teacher's name was Mr. Flunker – no kidding. And he warned us that one Friday the 13th, he was going to give us a quiz. He figured a quiz on a day known for bad luck, given by a guy named Flunker, we needed the advance warning. So he told us it wasn't a Pop Quiz. Pop quizzes come without warning. This would be a Mom Quiz. (Go ahead and groan – all the students in my class did.)

It turns out, in life, we rarely get Mom quizzes. Our lives are more often full of questions that come without warning. There's no real way to prepare for a pop quiz. You don't know the quiz is coming, much less what the questions are going to be. Our Scripture reading this morning is sort of a pop quiz for Jesus. Just before this story, the temptation, is the story of Jesus' baptism. There's not much of a transition between the two. According to Luke, Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted. That doesn't sound so bad. But in the Gospel of Mark it sounds much more violent. Mark says the Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness. Either way it's recorded, our image shouldn't be of Jesus just strolling around the desert. This is a sudden confrontation. This is a pop quiz.

And this quiz is hard! The devil didn't try to tempt Jesus by offering him things that he might want but are in reality no good. The devil didn't offer him triple chocolate cake. The devil

was testing Jesus to see if he could be lured away from obeying God by things that would be positive.

The first temptation here is to turn stones into bread. The Scripture tells us that Jesus is fasting – so he’s probably hungry. Bread would be nice. But this temptation is bigger than filling an empty belly. If Jesus could turn one stone into a loaf of bread for himself, he could turn all the rest of the stones into bread and feed the whole world. Jesus could end much suffering by feeding the hungry. But Jesus came to do more than relieve temporary, worldly problems. Jesus came to point us to God, to restore our relationship with God. Bread is good, but not good enough to be Jesus’ mission.

The second temptation is to rule the world. Imagine what it would be like if Jesus actually was the king. Christians say that Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords, but what if Jesus really was in charge? Of every country? There would be no more war, no more corruption in government. There would truly be peace on earth. Wouldn’t that fulfill Jesus’ mission? Not if he had to worship the devil in order to accomplish it. The ends don’t justify the means.

The final temptation is to test whether God’s promises are true. In Psalm 91, we read that angels will guard the believer, lest he or she even bruise a foot on a stone. If God promised it, it should be true and dependable, right? If Jesus would just test out this theory, then all people would have proof; they’d have tangible reason to trust all of God’s other promises. But faith is about trusting. According to the book of Hebrews, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And even Jesus later says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and have yet come to believe.”

So the devil comes by with these three significant temptations: ending hunger, ruling the world, and proving God’s existence. How is it that Jesus is able to pass such a complex,

unexpected quiz about his mission? Jesus falls back on his faith. He returns to what is the most basic, most important to him. Jesus doesn't answer the devil by saying, "Um, I'm not sure that's a good idea." Jesus backs up his responses with solid reasoning.

Remember that Mom quiz I had in algebra? Remember any quiz you ever had in any math class? Teachers don't really like it when you just put down an answer. In math, you always have to show your work. How did you get from step A to step E? I was never the best student at math. I tried hard, but I usually got bogged down somewhere in the middle. So I was always thankful for those math teachers who gave partial credit. I may not have gotten all the steps right, but if I started out okay, I got credit for that. When Jesus is quoting Scripture, he's showing his work. He's letting both the devil and us as the readers know where he's getting his answer.

Now keep in mind, Jesus doesn't have scrolls of Scripture with him in the wilderness. He doesn't have a searchable Torah on his smart phone. He doesn't get to say, "Oh wait... I think there's something about this in Exodus. Let me just look it up quick." Jesus has to know what's in the Scripture. But he also has to understand what's in the Scripture. After all, in the third temptation, the devil starts quoting Scripture back to Jesus. That's why you have to be careful about just quoting Scripture. People who disagree completely about an issue will both find a verse in the Bible to 'prove' their point of view. If you're going to use Scripture to support your faith, you have to do more than just take a sentence or two out of context. You have to look at Scripture as a whole. You have to look at the Bible as a cohesive message from God. So Jesus has to be able to do more than draw on verses he's memorized. He has to be able to understand what those verses mean. He has to be able to integrate that meaning into his life and mission. Jesus is able to pass this pop quiz because his faith runs deep and he was prepared for this challenge.

If any of you should ever one day consider entering ordained ministry, there are several ways people try to prepare you for a similar challenge. The Board of Ordained Ministry – the folks who interview potential new clergy – says that when they ask you questions about your faith and what you believe, there is no right or wrong answer. (This is, of course, within reason. You do have to express Christian faith.) But there are lots of ways to be Christian. Christians disagree with each other all the time about how to interpret Scripture. And the Board of Ordained Ministry says that what they're looking for is whether candidates can support and defend their theology. So they play Devil's Advocate and ask questions to determine whether you really can support what you believe.

But you don't have to be ordained to have to defend your faith. I'm guessing some of you have had times when you had to try to explain what you believe and why. Sometimes it's an innocent question from someone who just wants to understand. Sometimes it's accusatory remarks, arguing and attacking you for believing something different than another person. Maybe it's even that debate you have with yourself, questioning what is true. If you're not really sure what you believe, or if you have nothing to help you support your faith statements, those kind of conversations can be really hard.

That's why it's so important for us to learn to be grounded in our faith. To really understand what we believe, before we are challenged or tested. Jesus was successful because he was grounded in Scripture. But also because he relied on the Spirit of God. The Spirit may drive Jesus into the wilderness, but it doesn't drop him off and abandon him. The spirit is with Jesus throughout this experience. And the Spirit is with us as well.

Jesus did not have time to prepare for facing the devil. This blindsides him some random Tuesday afternoon. Jesus went from the high of his baptism, hearing God's voice call out and

affirm him, to the challenge of temptation. And that's the way life comes at us too. We don't know when our faith is going to be challenged. We don't know when to expect major life transitions. And when those kinds of things come up, we don't have time to prepare. This is one of the things Lent reminds us. That we need to think about our faith before we need it. Consider this a string on your finger or a note on the calendar. Make your dentist appointment, get the car checked out, and examine your faith.

When you're in the middle of crisis, that's not the time to be trying to figure out what you believe about God and faith. When difficult times arise, we fall back on whatever it is we already know and believe. That's why it's so important for us to come to church, to make time for spiritual disciplines like prayer and reading the Bible, to discuss our faith with one another. So we can be ready for the next pop quiz. Amen and amen.