

“Be Careful What You Promise”

Luke 4:1-13

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“I couldn’t help it,” Irish playwright Oscar Wilde wrote. “I can resist everything but temptation.”

This morning, our attention is focused upon the temptations Jesus faced in the desert soon after he was baptized. Three are recorded in Luke and Matthew’s accounts, focusing upon meeting physical needs, using power and achieving fame or recognition.

Since Jesus was alone in the desert and hungry, Satan tried to get him to use his power to turn stones into bread. Jesus didn’t take the bait, and responded with that famous line, “Man shall not live by bread alone.”

When that failed, Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, including the attention and authority which would accompany them, if he would bow down and worship him. Jesus refused to have all the splendor the world could provide in exchange for worshipping someone or something other than God.

When that offer was rejected, Satan took him to the pinnacle of the temple and encouraged him to jump. He assured Jesus God would send his angels to catch him, and the crowds watching would be wildly impressed and eager to follow him. Jesus quickly turned down this opportunity to test God or entertain people. Instead, he would draw disciples by being honest, compassionate and humble.

Jesus rebuffed Satan all three times, quoting scripture which helped him to make wise decisions. No doubt disappointed and frustrated, Satan departed. This would not be their last encounter, however; many more would follow.

You will find this story in three of the four gospels. Mark simply says he was driven into the wilderness and was tempted. Matthew and Luke expanded the account to include three specific temptations. Evidently, all three writers felt this story was important to the spiritual development of the early Christians. I certainly believe it is crucial to our understanding of Jesus, and what he came to do as well.

The most intriguing part of this story for me today is the **timing** of it. It occurred immediately after Jesus’ baptism, as he began his public ministry. That baptism symbolized the promises and commitments made to God as he set out on this journey, along with his desire to be faithful to reflect the character and nature of God.

Even before he could get started with his work and select the disciples who would help him, he was confronted with temptations designed to distract him from his mission and sabotage his good intentions.

I believe this sends a clear message to us this morning. **Every promise we make in the presence of affirming and encouraging family and friends will be tested in a hostile environment.** Every one!

This was certainly true for Jesus. It was no coincidence the temptation to use his special powers for self-serving ends came immediately after his baptism. Neither were the temptations random. They focused specifically upon the temptations which led many leaders of Jesus' time down the wrong path-meeting physical needs by taking short cuts, using power selfishly and achieving fame or recognition through sensationalism.

Haven't you experienced this? Sure, we all have, just as Luke's readers did. The length of time between making a promise and facing the temptation to break it is usually very short.

What promise have you made that was not tested? I would have to think a long time to come up with even one. Every promise I've made has been tested, and I suspect this is true for you, too.

Isn't this the reason we make commitments, though? We assume, and rightly so, testing will come, and it does.

When I meet with young couples preparing to get married, I talk to them about the vows they will repeat. I begin by asking each one what they need from their perspective mate. I ask them to finish this sentence: "I need you to..."

After each one has spoken, I then encourage them to respond to what they have heard by making commitments to one another. "Finish this sentence," I say to each one. "I promise to..."

Usually tears flow as they hold hands or hug, which indicates each one has been heard and these commitments are real. I caution them, however, to expect these promises to be tested. I remind them every promise made in a safe environment will be tested in a hostile one, and to expect the testing to come soon.

Promises and temptation naturally go together. They always have and always will. **In light of this, what promises have you made to God and those around you?** Who is depending upon you to keep your word? What impact will it have upon them if you don't?

I really think these are good questions to ask during Lent. Carve out time from your busy schedule in the weeks to come and give them a voice; let them speak to you.

What temptations threaten to undermine the promises you have made? What is Satan whispering in your ear and trying to convince you to do that would distract you from your mission? What does he want you to use your power and influence to get? What promise would he love to see you break?

Give your temptations a voice and quit living in denial. Name the things that will hurt you and everyone around you if they are not confronted and addressed.

It is obvious Jesus did this, and shared what he discovered with his disciples. It is also clear Luke wanted his readers to follow Jesus' example. Evidently, the early Christian community embraced the thought that personal satisfaction, the pursuit of wealth by any means, the need for recognition and the appeal to power were dangerous challenges to the kind of life and mission Jesus came to live and invites us to join. Is there any doubt these same temptations threaten to undermine our mission and influence, too?

How are you going to go about fulfilling your promises? I have to believe if you are here today, in your heart you want to be faithful to those around you and keep your promises. How do you do this, given the fact each of us is weak and vulnerable at times?

I think it begins by being careful who you listen to along your journey. Jesus had to choose between listening to the prophets or Satan. He chose the prophets, not because their advice was easy, but it was best.

Be leery of anyone who encourages you to break a promise you made in good faith. Carefully examine their motives; they are usually selfish.

To keep your promises, look at the short and long term consequences of the choices in front of you.

The Great Law of the Iroquois requires every leader to think seven generations ahead before making a decision.

"In all of your deliberations in the Confederate Council, in your efforts at law making, in all your official acts, self-interest shall be cast into oblivion. Cast not over your shoulder behind you the warnings of the nephews and nieces should they chide you for any error or wrong you may do, but return to the way of the Great Law which is just and right. Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground – the unborn of the future Nation."

Oren Lyons, Chief of the Onondaga Nation, writes: "We are looking ahead, which is one of the first mandates given us as chiefs, to make sure every decision we make relates to the welfare and well-being of the seventh generation to come. . . . What about the seventh generation? Where are you taking them? What will they have?"

What if we applied that same principle to our decisions? How would this influence our decisions?

What impact will your decision have upon those depending upon you to be faithful, in this generation and beyond? *In most cases, broken promises lead to broken hearts and broken dreams, and it takes years to recover.* Some wounds never heal, and those which do have permanent scars.

Do you really want to wreck others' lives and shred their dreams? Are you being naïve to think this will not happen?

Look down the road to see where it is leading you and others. You may not want to go that way.

Faithfulness requires that you rely upon the Holy Spirit, as Jesus did. He looked to God for the wisdom to know what to do and the resolve to be true to his calling in the face of opportunities to choose lesser goals.

“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” Luke 4:1-2a.

Luke highlights the close relationship that existed between Jesus and his heavenly Father, a theme that runs throughout his gospel. Jesus was led by the Spirit and comforted by Him during his time of testing. If Jesus relied upon the Spirit, how much more should we? “Deliver us from evil,” needs to be on our lips, too.

Jesus also relied upon those close by to help him remain faithful. After this wilderness experience, what did Jesus do? He called his disciples. This faith journey would require traveling companions that would listen to him, offer advice, encourage and pray for him.

Again, if Jesus needed a support group, how much more do we? All of us need friends that will hold us up and hold us accountable. We need companions that will ask tough questions. “Do you really want to do this? What will the consequences be? Who will be hurt or helped by this decision? Do you need to think about this more before moving forward?”

How can we keep our promises without God's help and others who love us? I cannot and don't see how anyone can. No one is wise or strong enough to withstand temptation alone. Over-confidence is deadly.

Whose help do you need in order to keep your commitments? Seek their help and listen to them because too much is at stake for you to do otherwise.

While you are at it, identify those people near and dear to you who need your help. Pray for them and make yourself available to listen.

What if you have already broken some promises you made? Must you live forever with guilt and shame? No, forgiveness is real and transformative. Hope springs out of being loved unconditionally and forgiven.

Own up to your mistakes and ask for forgiveness. Seek help to understand why you broke those promises, and what changes you need to make. With God's help, begin making them.

If you can reclaim what you have lost by breaking your promises, do so. If you cannot, then learn from this experience and don't repeat it. Pray those you hurt will find healing as you are being healed.

“I couldn’t help it,” Irish playwright Oscar Wilde wrote. “I can resist everything but temptation.”
This week, ask God to help you resist it.