

Lent 1 (C)
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Text: Luke 4:1-13

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When I make a trip that takes me to some place new, I usually use GPS to help navigate the unfamiliar roads. Most of the time it's really helpful. GPS can show me where traffic is heavy, or where to find a restaurant or a gas station. But sometimes GPS really isn't helpful at all. Once, when Melinda and I were on a trip that took us through Northern California, it showed us a "shortcut" to our destination. So we turned off of our small state highway onto a side road. But after a while, our side road lost the center strip down the middle of the road, and then it began to wind up into the hills, and we stopped seeing neighborhoods or businesses, or even single houses. Eventually it got really narrow, barely more than one lane wide, with no street signs or highway signs and we were starting to get low on gas. We kept asking each other, should we turn back? It was really anxious making! I felt like I was holding my breath for 20 miles.

We did finally get where we were going. And we did find a gas station, and everything worked out OK. But it reminded me that not every shortcut is worth taking, and some shortcuts might take you places you really don't want to go. In a way, that's what's going on in our gospel story for today. The devil is suggesting some shortcuts for Jesus to take as he fulfills his calling as God's beloved Son. The story is so dramatic—from the rocky wilderness, to viewing all the kingdoms of the world in an instant, to being perched on the pinnacle of the temple. I imagine these dramatic elements of the story as Jesus' way of picturing what it felt like for him to be tempted to take a shortcut that might make things easier and more comfortable for him, but would leave the human family in the same sorry state as before. What's most interesting to me is how Jesus' experience of testing can illumine our own experience, even though the particulars might be completely different. I've never been tempted to grasp for global domination, and I couldn't turn stone into bread no matter how hard I might try, but underneath those surface elements, there's a kind of universality in what Jesus went through.

First, the devil suggests that since Jesus is the Son of God, after 40 days of going without food, he should turn stone into bread in order to feed himself. It's not immediately clear from the story what would be wrong with that. Was it the challenge to prove that he was God's Son by performing a miracle? Or was it a matter of using his power only for his own benefit, his own survival? The story doesn't really tell us, but Jesus' reaction demonstrates that he recognized it as a shortcut that wouldn't take him where he wanted to go. His reply to the devil, that one does not live by bread alone, is a quote from Deuteronomy: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." It suggests that Jesus knew mere physical survival isn't

everything. It's possible to have all the necessities of living, but still have an empty life—empty of compassion and community and God's purposes that reach beyond our own little self. It seems to me that a good part of the advertising industry is focused on getting us to believe that there is a product we can buy that will fill our lives and make us feel important or desirable or secure or happy. I wonder when you've felt tempted to trust that possessions or money or power or status would give you the life you want, rather than Jesus' way of love, his way of compassion and forgiveness, his way of generosity and humility. I hear that message pretty much every time I turn on the TV. I wonder if you've ever felt entitled to something, that things should be different for you in some way, that there should be a shortcut for you to get what you want. (raise hand)

In the second temptation, the devil shows Jesus all the world's kingdoms in an instant, and says, these belong to me, but worship me and I'll give them to you. And again, there are so many questions that come to mind. Is the devil really in charge of all the world's governments? Sometimes it seems that way. Or is the devil just lying? In any case, Jesus rejects the devil's proposal out of hand. Again quoting from Deuteronomy, Jesus says we are to worship and serve only God. The devil's offer might sound like an attractive shortcut. Jesus could bypass the cross entirely! But Jesus knew that living a life rooted in love and driven by love is never safe and never a power move. Any parent can attest that as soon as you open your heart in love to a little one, you also open your heart to worry and fear and pain and suffering. And for Jesus to live his whole life as an expression of God's love for the entire world could not be a power move, and could not avoid grief or suffering. I wonder if you've ever wished for power and control over all the messiness in life. I certainly have. I wonder if you've ever felt tempted to insulate yourself with apathy or binge watching TV, or another glass of wine, so you wouldn't have to feel grief or sorrow for the suffering in our world. Don't you think there should be a shortcut to a pain-free world somehow? (raise hand)

Finally, then, the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and challenges him to jump, trusting God to protect him. It would be a huge spectacle! The devil even quotes scripture this time—God's angels will protect you! But again, Jesus rejects the devil's proposal. A third time now from Deuteronomy, Jesus quotes from the lessons Israel learned in their wilderness experience: Do not put the Lord your God to the test. For Jesus, staging a huge spectacle—at the temple, no less—could have been a great way to gather a massive following. People would have recognized Jesus' specialness and would have rushed to do whatever he said. But this spectacle wasn't just a shortcut, it led to a completely different destination. After all, how often have you seen a mob act with compassion and mercy? Jesus knew that God does not exist for our purposes, our convenience, our desires. I wonder if you've ever felt tempted to think that God should see things your way and get with your program. (raise hand) I wonder if you've ever felt

that because of your faith, you deserved something better from God than the way things were. There should be a shortcut to getting God's blessing, don't you think.

There are all sorts of ways that Jesus' experience of temptation can illumine the trials we go through, and I believe that Jesus' experience of overcoming temptation can speak to us too. One of the things I find helpful is how Jesus turned to scripture. It isn't that there's a Bible verse for every situation—and you've got to memorize them all. It's more like the stories of God's people through the generations can do a wonderful job of shining a light on basic human motivations and fears and desires. And when our imaginations are nourished by scripture, it can help us see our way through confusing situations. For example, when I'm impatient, or when I'm all up in my head about what I want, to the exclusion of what anyone else feels or wants or needs, it helps me to observe—well that doesn't look very much like loving my neighbor, does it. The Bible can do a wonderful job of naming some of the shortcuts we don't want to take, and some of the things we don't want to be driven by—like pride or envy or entitlement, or fear, or social conformity, or resentment or hate. The Bible also names some of the essential building blocks for a genuinely human, and humane, life—things like compassion and forgiveness; love of neighbors, including enemies; humility and generosity, and open community. The Bible can shine a powerful light on the life we really want, and the shortcut life our culture tells us to want.

Even if we don't feel like we know scripture well enough to use it like that, this story about Jesus being tested still has something very powerful to say to us. It reassures us that Jesus knows what we go through. Jesus has been there. We are not alone in this. Jesus knows what it's like to be presented with an attractive shortcut, that in the long run won't take us where we want to go. And on our behalf, he said no to the shortcut so that he can support us in our challenging times. We may never be perfect, but Jesus shows us how to do better. We have a Savior who has travelled a road like ours, subject to the same sorts of fears and worries and confusion, and he has opened the way for us into God's gracious and loving and merciful embrace. Perhaps we'll find that what protects us best when we are tested and tempted is our love and loyalty to such a gracious and forgiving Savior. Thanks be to God. Amen.