

I. Baptism and Temptation

The Jordan River and the Wilderness

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan.

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ONE DAY, AS JOHN WAS BAPTIZING in the Jordan, he looked up to see a familiar face. He smiled as Jesus approached, and the two men embraced. These men had known one another their entire lives. They had played together as boys and dreamed together as young men. John was six months older, but he always knew it was his younger cousin who would play the greater role in God's plans. The two had shared long walks and conversations both in Jerusalem and in the monastery by the Salt Sea. They had stayed up long into the night discussing the Scriptures and the kingdom of God. John's preaching and baptism at the Jordan would officially set in motion a chain of events that would lead to John's own death in a matter of months, and to Jesus' crucifixion just three years later.

Jesus took off his sandals and robe and said to John, "Baptize me, brother!" John stepped back, confused, protesting: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus insisted, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:14, 15 NRSV). With his baptism, the three-year public ministry of Jesus began. From this time on, the die was cast. The prospect was exciting, and terrifying. Jesus was thirty years of age when he waded into the waters of the Jordan to be baptized by his older cousin.

Even in the first century, Christians were unsettled by John's baptism of Jesus. They wondered, as modern-day disciples do, why one who "knew no sin" received a baptism, indicating a repentance of sin.

In Jesus' baptism, the sinless man chose to identify with sinful people. He stepped into the water not out of his need but for ours. Later he would tell his disciples that "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). He wasn't embarrassed to identify with sinners by wading into the waters of repentance. He didn't announce to everyone present, "I don't

really need this; it's for you." He chose to let others think what they would—he was walking into the water with us and for us. In the days ahead, he would eat with sinners and tax collectors. He would befriend prostitutes and adulterers. This was his mission. In his baptism, Jesus identified with sinners.

At the church that I serve, we have support groups for people with various addictions. If you had friends who struggled with sexual addiction, and you knew they might find help and deliverance by attending a support group, would you offer to go with them to the group? Would you worry what others might think as they saw you enter the room? Would you feel the need to say, "I'm with them. I don't really have a sexual addiction. I'm just their friend"? Or would you sit quietly with your friends, hoping and praying that because you were there with them, they might find help? In essence, this is what Jesus did when he was baptized. He identified with sinners, not only joining them in the water but also inviting all who would follow him to wade in.

Baptism has many meanings. Like a kaleidoscope, it presents a different picture with each turn. As Jesus stepped into the water to identify with sinful humanity and become the Son of Man, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove. He heard the voice of God announcing that he was God's beloved son, with whom God was "well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Thus, in that moment Jesus was declaring that he was the Son of man while God was declaring that he was the Son of God. Jesus also received power from the Spirit for the ministry that lay ahead. Here at the Jordan, we see the first glimpse of what Christians would come to call the Trinity. The Son came to be baptized. The Father spoke. The Spirit descended.

The Jordan River

Most Christians who visit the Holy Land have gone to the Jordan River to remember the baptism of Jesus and their own baptism. Until recently nearly all these pilgrims visited a site just south of the Sea of Galilee called Yardenit. It is a beautiful place, with trees and with water that is relatively clear and perhaps one hundred feet across. Robes, changing rooms, towels, and showers make this a great place to step into the Jordan. But this is not where John baptized Jesus (or anyone else). If you want to experience the Jordan as it was when Jesus was baptized, in the place at or near where he was baptized, you'll need to travel sixty-five miles south of there, to a newly opened site on the Jordan near Jericho.

Here the river is about twenty feet wide and no more than four to five feet deep (except in the spring). It has thickets of reeds on either side, and the water runs the color of a cup of green tea with cream.

On the Jordanian side of the river, the ruins of Byzantine churches have been found pointing toward this as an ancient site where Christians came to remember their baptisms. New churches have been constructed there. The Israeli bank was covered in mines for the last forty years, but now these have been removed and a modest pavilion has been set up for Christians to recall the baptism of Jesus. A small gift shop sells robes and towels. Cold showers are outside to rinse off after stepping in the Jordan. Jordanian soldiers stand watch on one side of the river, Israeli on the other, as Christians from around the world come, one bus at a time, to remember the baptism of Christ.

In the DVD that is available to accompany this book, I take you to this site. When I visited it was February, and I had the site to myself. The temperature that day was in the sixties, and so was the water temperature. As I stepped into the water, the feel of the riverbed struck me as my feet sank into the soft, smooth soil. I suspect it felt much the same to Jesus, John, and the thousands John baptized. I immersed myself in the water to remember my own baptism and to identify with Jesus, who was baptized by John in this place.

Beloved of God

The words spoken by God at Jesus' baptism come, at least in part, from Psalm 2:7, a coronation song in which the psalmist speaks of the kings of Israel as God's sons. But it is not an exact quote. The Psalm says, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (Psalm 2:7 NRSV). But to Jesus, God spoke in the midst of his baptism, saying "You are my Son, *my beloved*, with you I am *well pleased*" (Mark 1:11 NRSV, emphasis added).

Jesus was "beloved" of God. The word used was *agapetos*—a Greek adjective that is a term of endearment signifying a special and deep bond with a favorite person, one who is treasured and dear. God reaffirmed this special relationship with Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration, not long before Jesus' death, by using the Greek verb *eudokeo*. The word indicates taking particular delight or pleasure in someone or something.

Recently our oldest daughter Danielle and her husband moved back to Kansas City after being away for several years. They returned to the area so Danielle could go to graduate

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school. Having her back has brought great joy to my wife LaVon and me. I gave Danielle a big hug the other day and told her, “I love you so much. I feel such joy that you are back in Kansas City and I get to see you regularly.” To me, this is the sense that *agapetos* and *eudokeo* carry with them; this is what Jesus was hearing from God.

For Jesus, his baptism was a defining act. In that moment, he identified with sinners and heard God’s affirmation that he was the Father’s beloved son. He received the Spirit’s power. And it marked the beginning of his ministry. Jesus’ baptism was an ordination in which he was set aside and empowered for his mission of drawing people to God, inviting them into God’s kingdom, demonstrating God’s will, and ultimately laying down his life for humanity.

For us, as Christ followers, Baptism is also meant as a defining act. Through our baptism we are claimed by God, anointed with the Spirit, and set aside for God’s purposes. Our brokenness is recognized and God’s grace is promised. And in our baptisms we are initiated into, and become a part of, God’s covenant people. We are meant to remember our baptisms each day. Even if we don’t remember the act of baptism itself, we remember that God has promised to forgive our sins, that we are called to ministry, that the Holy Spirit resides in us, and that we are God’s children.

It is said that Martin Luther, when he struggled with bouts of depression, would look into the mirror when he was at his lowest and say to himself, “Martin Luther, you are baptized. Don’t forget it.” Several years ago, when preaching on baptism, I invited our members to remember their baptism each day. To help them do so, we prepared a simple prayer and printed it on a plastic card with a rubber band attached. We invited our members to hang this prayer in their shower and to recite the prayer when they stepped into the water each morning. The card says,

Lord, as I enter the water to bathe, I remember my baptism.

Wash me by your grace. Fill me with your Spirit. Renew my soul.

I pray that I might live as your child today and honor you in all that I do.

We give these shower tag prayers to our graduating high school seniors each year so that, when they go off to college, each morning as they take a shower they will remember their baptisms and, in so doing, remember who they are. They are children of God and a part of the family of Christ.

Led to the Wilderness

The Scripture tells us that Jesus, immediately following what must have been one of the most spiritually significant experiences of his life, was led (or driven) by the Spirit to the wilderness to be tempted while fasting for forty days and forty nights. Many of you will be reading this book during the season of Lent. The Christian season of Lent is a forty-day period, excluding Sundays, in which Christ followers join Jesus on his forty-day fast, spiritually walking in his footsteps. Lent is a season of repentance and spiritual self-examination. It is a time to draw near to Christ, and a time when we recall our brokenness and mortality. This allows us to appreciate the blessings that come on Good Friday and Easter, when Christ dies for us and then is raised to life.

As we retrace Jesus' footsteps during his forty days in the wilderness, we'll learn something about where he spent the forty days and why he went there, and we'll consider the nature and meaning of his wrestling match with the devil.

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Jesus left John at the Jordan River and hiked five miles due west across a flat desert dotted with scrub brush. The desert likely looks the same today as it did when Jesus began his journey. In this area one might pass a camel or two, or a shepherd grazing his sheep, but otherwise there's not a lot to see between the Jordan River and the mountains of the wilderness. According to tradition Jesus would have passed on the north side of Jericho, the desert oasis town. He would also have come very close to the Wadi Qelt, where King Herod had built a fabulous winter palace, a palace that was at that time still in use by his family, the ruins of which you can visit to this day.

Just north of Jericho, the first of many Judean wilderness mountains arises. It is a rugged and barren mountain, known today as Mount Qurantal. (*Qurantal* means forty; the mountain is so named because it is thought that Jesus spent his forty days of temptation here.) It is often referred to simply as the Mount of Temptation.

Some people who read that Jesus spent forty days and nights in the wilderness picture an overgrown tropical forest. But the wilderness of Judea is a desert, dry and arid, that looks something like the Badlands of South Dakota or one of many places in the desert southwest of the United States. This is where Jesus would spend the next forty days and forty nights fasting, praying, and wrestling with the devil.

Halfway up Mount Qurantal is a large cave, easily seen from the base of the mountain. The tradition going back at least to the 300s is that Jesus slept there during his forty days. Certainly this was the closest large cave in the wilderness to the place where Jesus was baptized.

Today the Monastery of the Temptation clings to the side of the mountain and covers the cave. Pilgrims can walk up, as Jesus did, or ride a tram. I took that walk with a group of pilgrims

on a recent trip. Once inside the monastery, we went past rooms belonging to Orthodox monks until coming to the entrance of the large cave. Partway back into the cave, which is set up as a chapel, is an iron gate. It is opened at various times during the day for service or for visitors to go deeper into the cave. At the back of this large cave is an opening and several stairs down. All but children have to duck their heads as they enter. Here is a smaller cave, which I judged to be about three feet by six feet with a height of about five feet. This smaller cave is said to be where Jesus slept during his forty days and forty nights in the wilderness.

I was fortunate to have the space to myself for a few moments, and I tried to imagine Christ sleeping here. Scattered throughout the room were photos brought by visitors of loved ones they were praying for, and scraps of paper bearing prayer requests. I paused for a moment there to pray and to thank Christ for choosing to undergo the temptations, and I invited him to strengthen me when I face the tempter.

As I left the Monastery of the Temptation, I walked down a path where most visitors don't go. It took me back to the mountainside, just below the monastery. I imagined Jesus walking this desolate path, with nothing to eat or drink, sleeping alone in a cave, and I was reminded that the wilderness is often a metaphor for those places we don't want to go, when life seems barren and the road seems hard and we seem to be wrestling with evil.

I thought of Elijah, who fled to the wilderness when the evil Queen Jezebel sought to kill him. I remembered David, who fled from Saul and lived among the caves, writing psalms with words such as "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" I thought about Moses, living for those long years as a fugitive from Pharaoh's hand in the wilderness of Sinai. All these stories have one thing in common: God met each of these men as they

sojourned in the wilderness. What was true for them is true for us. All of us sojourn in the wilderness at times in our lives, feeling hopeless and all alone. Yet when we pay attention and listen, God comes to us and uses the wilderness to strengthen and sanctify us.

The Judean Wilderness

Did Jesus stay in the cave for forty days and forty nights? There is so much rugged beauty all around the Judean wilderness that I suspect if he stayed there, it was only for a few days. There are places far more enticing and impressive as you walk a few hours farther into the wilderness. But the cave gives us an anchor, a placeholder to remember that Jesus came to the wilderness, somewhere around this place, to walk and pray and be tempted.

As I was in the Holy Land retracing Jesus' footsteps for this book, I spent hours in the wilderness visiting places I had never seen before. It was one of the most beautiful places I've ever been—absolutely captivating. I felt a connection with Moses, who spent nearly all his adult life in the wilderness of the Sinai, and with David, who composed many of his psalms in the Judean wilderness. I could see how Elijah would hear the “still small voice” of God in this place, and why John the Baptist chose to live his life here.

Beginning in the late third century, spiritually hungry Christ followers began to live in caves in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. These followers were called the Desert Fathers. At one time several thousand

lived in the wilderness of Judea, identifying with John and Jesus as they devoted themselves to prayer and the pursuit of God.

If you visit the Holy Land, ask your guide if it would be possible, while in Jerusalem or Jericho, to visit the wilderness above the monastery of St. George along the Wadi Qelt, and plan to spend time there walking and praying in silence, remembering John's life in the wilderness and Jesus' forty days being tempted. The wilderness is not far off the road linking Jerusalem to Jericho, and it is well worth the trip.

The Meaning of the Three Temptations

Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness. The number is significant. The rain that raised Noah's ark fell for forty days and forty nights. Moses spent forty days and forty nights fasting on Mount Sinai as he received the Law. Elijah fasted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness before hearing God whisper to him. In addition to these examples, there was one more connection to the number forty that may have been important. The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years. In Deuteronomy 8:2, Moses says that that period of wandering was to test them, "to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments" (NRSV). This last connection seems to have been foremost in Jesus' mind, for in his responses to the devil's temptations we find that all three of his responses came from Deuteronomy, chapters 6 to 8.

Jesus' temptations and his time in the wilderness were a way for him to connect with the stories of the holy people of old, but

they meant more than that. The temptations served as a test for Jesus. Just as a teacher gives a test, not to break students but to strengthen them, so it was with this test. (The Greek word for temptation, *peirazo*, is often translated as “testing.”) Jesus was being tempted, but more important he was being tested, so that when he began his public ministry and faced adversity and success, he would continue steadfast in his mission.

When you think of Jesus’ temptations, how do you imagine them? The Gospels describe a conversation between Jesus and the devil. We might take this literally and at face value. But it seems more likely that Jesus had a conversation with the devil in the same way we have conversations with the devil. I don’t see a man in red tights, carrying a pitchfork. I hear a whisper to do something I have no business doing or urging me to refrain from doing what I should do. He personifies the inner spiritual struggles that all of us face. We’ve all wrestled with the devil.

We don’t know all the temptations the devil threw at Jesus over those forty days, but Matthew and Luke tell us of three specific temptations. Unless they were simply making it up, the only way they could have known this information was for Jesus to have described his wrestling match with the devil to his disciples. I think this is likely. And if he did so, he was trying to teach them something about temptation, and he was also revealing something about his own temptations, which can be seen as the archetypal or universal struggles we wrestle with as human beings.

Jesus’ first temptation was about food. Food is among our most basic needs, but the desire for it can at times be our undoing. This first temptation takes us back to the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve were tested by the Tempter, who urged them to eat the forbidden fruit. They succumbed to the temptation, ate the fruit, and paradise was lost. Several chapters later

in Genesis, Esau was willing to sell his birthright to his brother Jacob for a bowl of porridge. In Exodus, the Israelites were willing to return to slavery in Egypt so they could eat cucumbers and leeks rather than manna. In each of these stories, the desire for instant gratification that was related to food led to (or in the case of the Israelites in the wilderness, would have led to) a profound loss of blessing.

Those of us who live in the developed world struggle with the temptations surrounded by food. We are tempted to eat too much, or to eat the kinds of food that increase the likelihood of disease. We know this but find it hard to say no to the devil's whispers. Meanwhile our eating habits have helped cause a health-care crisis. We also know that millions of people die of starvation and malnutrition each year, yet few of us give to causes that benefit those in extreme poverty.

Jesus was hungry after fasting for forty days. He was tempted to break his fast and use his power to feed himself. He knew what it was to be tempted by food. Yet he resisted, which later made it possible for Jesus to tell his disciples, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" Jesus' response to the devil when tempted by food was to quote from Moses' words in Deuteronomy 8:3: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (NRSV).

In the second temptation, the devil invited Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple. This temptation can be understood in one of two ways. It may represent the nearly universal tendency to win affirmation and affection by doing dangerous stunts. When I was growing up, once or twice a year a showman named Evel Knieval would get on his motorcycle and jump across a football field, and later across a river and a canyon. The

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whole nation would watch this guy, who broke over four hundred bones during the course of his life. Today, millions tune in to television shows broadcasting the exploits of people who are willing to eat the most disgusting things and do the most dangerous things, in order to win a prize and claim their fifteen minutes of fame. I'm not knocking this. I'm suggesting that it's one way to win friends and influence people, and that jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple may have been the archetype of the reality show. However, God was calling Jesus to "win friends and influence people" not by a foolish stunt, but by bearing a crown of thorns in an act of sacrificial love.

Jesus' second temptation may also be understood in a different way. Have you ever stood on a high building and had the urge, just for a moment, to jump? As terrifying as that urge may be, there seems to be in each of us an odd and morbid temptation to test fate—or, for some, a more serious temptation to end it all. I wonder if Jesus, at a very subtle level, might have been tempted to jump, knowing that either God would deliver him, or his life would be over without having to endure the journey that lay ahead. If this were the case, then the archetypal temptation here is suicide. At the very least, Jesus stood on the ledge of the building and thought for a moment about jumping. When I minister with people who are suicidal, it has struck me that this may be a helpful insight into the temptation they are fighting—that Jesus knew what it was to stand on the ledge and seriously to consider jumping. But Jesus, choosing instead to see the difficult journey ahead through the eyes of faith and realizing that God would redeem his suffering, did not jump.

Finally we have the last of the temptations recorded in the Gospels, though we can be sure that Jesus knew many other temptations in his life and ministry. This last is the archetypal temptation to sell one's soul for wealth and power. Listen to this

temptation as told by Matthew: “The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me’” (4:8-9 NRSV).

This final temptation is like the first temptation for food and drink, but it goes far beyond that. This is the temptation that drives so many in our world today. Many who start life with the best of intentions find the allure of wealth and power to be irresistible. Jesus was told that if he would only bow down and worship the devil, he could have it all. And undoubtedly he could have. Imagine if Jesus had yielded to this temptation, using his gifts for his own gain and basing his life on an abundance of possessions. He would have been fabulously wealthy and gained immense power, and the world would have continued its relentless march toward self-destruction.

Whether we spend our tithes and offerings on lottery tickets, or we cheat on our taxes, or we misrepresent our products and services, or we pretend to be something we’re not in order to further our quest for financial gain, most of us have struggled with this temptation.

Jesus responded to the devil with these words: “Away with you, Satan! For it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’” (Matthew 4:10 NRSV). Jesus was angry. Perhaps he was irritated with the tempter’s games, or maybe this was the most appealing and threatening of the temptations. I suspect the latter because of the number of times Jesus addressed this topic in the Gospels. Often, my most powerful sermons are addressed to me first. Jesus did not need to preach to himself, but he did know the lure of wealth and power, and that lure undoubtedly shaped his teaching that “one cannot serve both God and mammon” (Matthew 5:24 NKJV).

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We all have moments when we wrestle with the devil. During those moments, God speaks to us through Scripture, through other people, and through the “still small voice.” Yet the devil, as we’ve seen in the temptation story, speaks to us in those same ways: through Scripture (the devil, as he did with Jesus, is a master at proof-texting, taking minor points of Scripture and using them to override more important texts), through other people, and through his own whispers in our head.

Jesus countered these tempting thoughts and rebuked the tempter by quoting Scripture. (Interestingly, all the Scriptures that Jesus used with the devil came from Deuteronomy 6-8, in which Moses stood just across the Jordan River from the place where Jesus was being tempted.) I find that Scripture is a pretty good place to start in my own struggles with the tempter.

Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness were meant to test his resolve, not with the aim of weakening him, but in order to strengthen him. When we fast and pray and stare down our own temptations, we find it does the same for us.

It’s comforting to know that Jesus felt the power of these temptations. As the writer of Hebrews says in 4:15-16: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (NRSV).

Walking in the footsteps of Jesus begins with baptism but will inevitably include temptation. The way of Christ includes striving to resist temptation. Yet when we do succumb to temptation, we “approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy” from the one who knew temptation.