

Sermon on Luke 4:1-13
First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today I have a little test for you. It's a test for *how much you love me*. Here it goes. I am going to climb up on top of this pulpit, and then I am going to invite all of you to come down and stand in front of the pulpit. Once you are all here, then I am going to say, "If you love me, you will catch me"....and then I am going to jump. When you catch me, then you will pass my body around like I am floating upside down in a rushing river. So, are you ready? Should I do it?

Why not? What would you do if I took a flying leap from this pulpit? Would you love me enough to catch me? Or would you sit there and think, "This is one crazy pastor. Let's let him jump. We can form a call committee and find someone more sane and less manipulative to be *our* pastor!" And you'd be right. Because it would be an unfair test and needless manipulation for me to require this of you. But do you know what? *We do this to God all the time!*

Think about it. How many times in our lives do we ask God to save us or a loved one from pain, or help us succeed when we are afraid of failure? Why do we do that? To make God prove that God love us? Or to make God prove that God exists? It usually goes like this: when we are in trouble, or have done something wrong and are about to get caught, we bargain with God, and say "Lord, if you get me out of this, I will go to church *every Sunday!*" (Like we're doing God a favor by coming to worship!) Or we say, "Lord, if you don't make me go to jail, I will NEVER do that again!" (Sorry, the police aren't buyin' it!) Or, "Lord, if you get me through this, if you bring my friend back to life, I will devote my entire life to you, maybe I'll even become a monk, or I'll give 10% of my earnings to the Church!" Finally, there's the old standby: "Lord, if you really exist, make a lifeboat come by and save me from drowning." By that time, it's probably a little too late for bargaining.

Have you ever in your life done something like this, bargained with God, or told God that you would love and serve Him if God did something for you? So soon after Ash Wednesday, I think that we can all confess that yes, we have, at some point in our lives! And have you ever *used scripture* to make your point? Like, "Lord, you said if I fall, you would send angels to protect me" – so why do I get hurt everytime I fall down? Don't you love me? Or, "Lord, you said in the Bible that you provide for my every need. Why am I hungry, and why am I unemployed? Don't you care about me?" Have you ever thought something like this? "Lord, you said in the Bible that the righteous will inherit the earth. Why do I have nothing?" The implication is that whenever we are hungry, God should feed

us, and whenever we are hurting, God must not care. We forget that God does provide – there are ample resources throughout the earth to care for all of our needs, and people with abundant gifts to share them, and somehow we still get hungry and we suffer. So we blame God, or wonder if a loving God exists!

Well, today we find that we are in good company. For today we hear from the gospel that the devil also sought to test God, by trying to manipulate God's Son. You know the story. That how immediately after Jesus was baptized by John, Jesus went out into the wilderness, *full of the Holy Spirit, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil*. After 40 days of fasting, Jesus was hungry. That's when the devil went to work. "If you are the Son of God," he said to Jesus, "command this stone to become a loaf of bread." But Jesus refused, saying "one does not live by bread alone." Then the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth, and offered to give him all power and authority over them, if he would worship him. But Jesus quoted scripture that said, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Finally, the devil took him to the highest pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, and scripture says that God will send angels to bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone." (You can almost imagine the devil starting to sing *On Eagle's Wings!*) But Jesus answered with another scripture, saying "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." So the devil left, until a more opportune time.

"Yes, even the devil can quote scripture" is a famous line from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, whom I think was quoting Luther! Because Martin Luther had the best "lines" and vivid imagery for the devil and his cunning. One of those things that the devil does is try to deceive and confuse us, sometimes even by misquoting scripture or quoting it out of context. It's a skill many of us Christians have learned to use to our advantage, whenever we want to score points in our debates with others! A good test, then, for all of us is how do we use scripture in times of testing or crisis? Do we hunt for scriptures that prove our point? Do we stop searching as soon as we find the Bible verse that supports our point of view? In public debate, this sort of research would be exposed immediately! And in life it is a dishonest way to read or use the Bible. Instead, Christ calls us to read God's Word to seek the truth, and God's will for our lives, even when it is contrary to our own point of view!

So did this story really happen? Yes and no; it depends on what you mean. Many believe that it did, just as the Bible says, and that's okay. Others call this story of Jesus and the devil a *parable*, a story that uses real characters to point to a larger truth. One way to think of this story today is that it symbolizes the battle that goes on within each of us, a battle that certainly went on in Jesus' mind when he began his ministry, between the devil's deception and the truth of God. It

symbolizes the contrast between the devil's evil power that brings sin and death, versus the power of God's love, which leads to life!

So what is the scripture telling you and me today? Certainly it's a story that reinforces the truth that God's power in Jesus is greater than the deceptive power of the devil. It's also a story of Jesus giving an example for all of us of how to resist the temptation of life and of the devil ourselves. For when we seek the *truth* quoting it out of context, by which we might be led astray. We are reminded by Jesus in this passage that *we do not live by bread alone* – an encouragement that helps us keep our priorities straight. He said “*Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God*” to remind us that we were all created by God, and only God is worthy of our praise – when human celebrities and political leaders seek our allegiance. Finally, when Jesus said “*Do not put the Lord your God to the test*” reminds us that whenever we find ourselves bargaining with God, or testing God in order for God to perform some trick that benefits us, we should *stop*. God doesn't have to prove anything to us, for God is God. We are humans, we are God's children, and if we aren't satisfied by what God has already done for us over the ages and in our own lifetimes, we shall *never* be satisfied!

So you don't have to “prove” your love for me by catching me if I jump from the top of this pulpit, or from the balcony. I would be a fool to demand this test of you. Nor should you demand any test from me, or from God. Once we have proved ourselves in relationship, we need to rely on our trust for each other. And God has certainly proved God's love for us over and over and over again! God proved God's love for the world by creating it. God proved his love for ancient Israel, by leading them out of slavery in Egypt and to a Promised Land. God proves his love for us by giving us life, and for staying with us always, forgiving us whatever we have done. The greatest “proof” of all that God offers is the giving of God's Son to die for the sins of the world, and the proof of God's power is raising Jesus from the dead to give all who believe eternal life.

So in times of testing, Jesus' teaches us by the example of his life to simply *trust God and his love for us*. We don't need to climb onto the top of a mountain and jump to know that God will catch us when we fall. We don't need to demand that God provide bread magically when we are hungry, when we know there is plenty of bread and plenty of brothers and sisters in Christ to share it. We don't have to keep looking for heroes or powerful people to worship or follow when we have Christ as Lord, who calls us to follow him! So I close with the words of Paul, in what may be the oldest creed of all in the Church, who says “*If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*” And that's the truth! All you and I will ever need is to trust in God, and follow Jesus, and we will have life forever! Thanks be to God.