



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Magnifying God

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 14, 2016  
The First Sunday in Lent—Based on Luke 4:1-13*

What would does it look like to beat the devil? Well, look around at this victorious company who all clearly passed the devil's test: whether or not to stay in bed this morning!

One of the few places in the Scriptures that we see a complete victory against the devil is in the life of Jesus. In our reading today from Luke's Gospel, we witness the first confrontation between Jesus and the mysterious figure of the devil. Luke tells us that immediately after his baptism, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit to the wilderness, where Jesus fasted for 40 days. He became hungry. He became weak. It was after those 40 days and 40 bitterly cold nights on those desert rocks that Jesus confronted the Devil, who challenged him with three epic temptations.

The first was the suggestion to turn the stones in the desert to bread to satisfy his extreme hunger. But Jesus rebukes this suggestion saying, "one does not live by bread alone." What could he mean by this? He was quoting Hebrew scripture here. And, it's not incidental that this Scripture refers to the Israelites when they were hungry in their own wilderness, for 40 years the wandered, yearning to go back to the fleshpots, those amazing meat stews, in Egypt. But it would mean that they would have to return to their chains, to go back slavery, a kind of deal with the devil, to be fed by the devil's food. But it was not God's will that they be enslaved, so God gave them manna to eat in the wilderness. In the same way, Jesus turns the devil's bread away, acknowledging to the devil that God will provide, somehow.

The devil's next temptation is to show Jesus all the realms of the world and to give Jesus authority over them, after all the devil has a ruling hand in all the governments, it seems. This is, at its heart, the temptation to be powerful. And indeed, many of Jesus' disciples would agree with the devil. Many thought that Jesus, if he was really the Messiah, should overthrow the evil Roman empire, and that Jesus should be emperor of the whole world so that the world could be saved. But Jesus knew that God's will for him was not power of that sort, but a power found not threatening for power, drawing lines in the sand of who is in and who is out, not in killing for power, but a power of what looks like extraordinary weakness and humility, of love for the enemy not in the hope for their destruction. And so Jesus rebukes the devil by quoting scripture again, saying "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." He seeks not a will for power, not earthly power, at least.

Then the devil takes Jesus to the very place that he would be crucified, to Jerusalem, and asks him to throw himself off the top of the temple. And this time the devil quotes scripture. Yes, as we know in our time, scripture can be twisted to destroy, kill, and ruin. [ As a matter of fact, he quotes the psalm that we sang today, Psalm 91. ] The devil suggests that if Jesus were really God's Beloved Child, then God "will command his angels concerning you, to protect you...and on these angels' hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." And the devil is technically correct. The Scripture is full of accounts that say that God will protect those who are faithful and righteous. But, also it includes accounts of God's good people suffering and in exile. And so, Jesus knows that God is good, and watches over him, but that God's goodness does not necessarily extend to answering every whim that he has, whether it be providing him with endless sunny days or saving him from leaps of faith, in this case a leap to show off. And also, Jesus is not called to prove himself with acts of derring-supernatural-do. He is called to be faithful, which will end up serving the same purpose of proving himself. So, Jesus retorts with another piece of scripture, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

And so Jesus triumphs. He triumphs by saying no again and again to the power of some superhero, turning instead to a deeper power, a power grounded in goodness, the truth, and love, nothing more. But this triumph is on an ominous note, because when the devil is finished, the devil leaves to wait until "an opportune time." This is generally understood to mean the time when Jesus struggled in Gethsemane with taking up his cross, whether or not to save his self in God, but lose his life, or to lose his life, and save himself and the hope of the whole world.

Although it is in the form of an extraordinary story, the challenges Jesus faced with the devil should be familiar to all of us. Jesus was not facing a terrible figure with horns and a tail. Nor was he facing a smooth, suave deceiver in a smart suit and a red tie. He was facing the temptations that lie in all of us, that seem to take a life of their own, that know our every weakness,

that respond cleverly to our every defense, and are just as clever as us. A great spiritual insight is that the struggle with evil in the world begins with the struggle with evil in ourselves. And Jesus maps out for us some of the most difficult struggles that we will have. The temptation of bread: the desire to secure our survival at any cost, not trusting in God for our daily bread. The temptation of ruling the kingdoms of the world: or the desire to have control over our world, to have power over a world that is truly God's. The temptation to throw himself off the temple, or the desire to claim our identity and prove our importance to others using reckless methods. It is these temptations that turn us away from a life lived for God, and toward a life lived for our own glory and exaltation.

How can we live our lives trusting that God will give us our daily bread, rather than warping our integrity to get by? How can we love and serve others, rather than seeking to control them, like some tyrant. And how can we be confident that we don't have to prove ourselves to anyone, that we can rest in God's love without chasing after the love and admiration and glory of others. Whatever practice or improvement we take up for Lent, we acknowledge our limitations. It is not a complete overhaul. We will not become a new house during these spiritual renovations of Lent. But we will spruce up the house we have,

And the guest that is coming to our houses is not some landlord that will evict us if he finds us short on his balance sheet. No, the guest that is coming is a beloved family member that we haven't seen in years. In fact, it is the very family member who gave us the food we eat, the house we live in, the clothes off our backs, the air we breathe, and all those who we hold dear. What we do to amend our lives is not done out of fear, but it is done out of praise and thanksgiving, to the one who created us, guides us out of darkness, who loves us so much to even give his life to us. When Lent is at an end, may our houses be ready for this most wonderful guest.

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