

What Sort of Messiah?

(The Gospel According to Luke, Part I)

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — March 5, 2017

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Luke 4:1-36 ESV

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."

And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'"

And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

And Jesus answered him, "It is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'"

And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,' 1and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"

And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

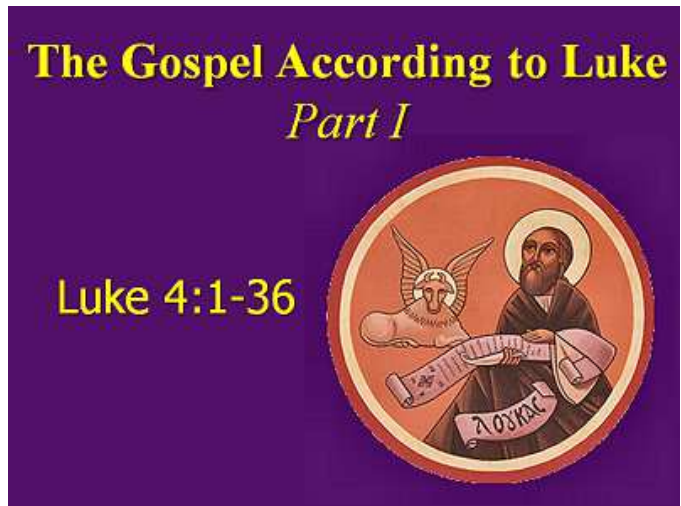
And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well." And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away.

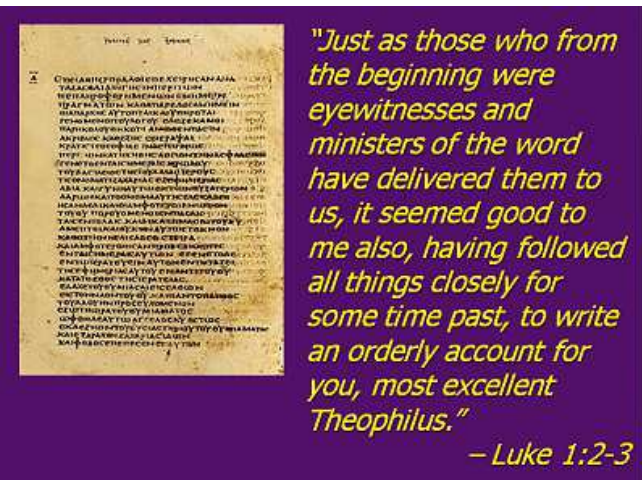
And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority. And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God."

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. 36 And they were all amazed and said to one another, "What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!"



Here's a "pop quiz" for you: Who wrote more of the New Testament than any other writer? Often you'll hear people say that Paul wrote the most, and in fact he is the author of more books of the New Testament. But many of those "books" are relatively short letters. The fact is it's Paul's associate, Dr. Luke, who wrote more of the New Testament by sheer volume, because he's the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospel has 24 chapters, and Acts has 28, and most of those chapters are pretty long. (Of course, Luke didn't divide his writing into chapters; that was done in the 13th century by the English Archbishop Stephen Langton, and the current division into verses didn't happen till 1551 when Robert Estienne published his Greek New Testament.)

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, and from now till Easter we'll be following Jesus through the Gospel According to Luke. Since Luke is such a long book we'll only be able to sample his material, especially some of the material found only in his Gospel. As you know, each of the Gospel authors (we call them Evangelists,

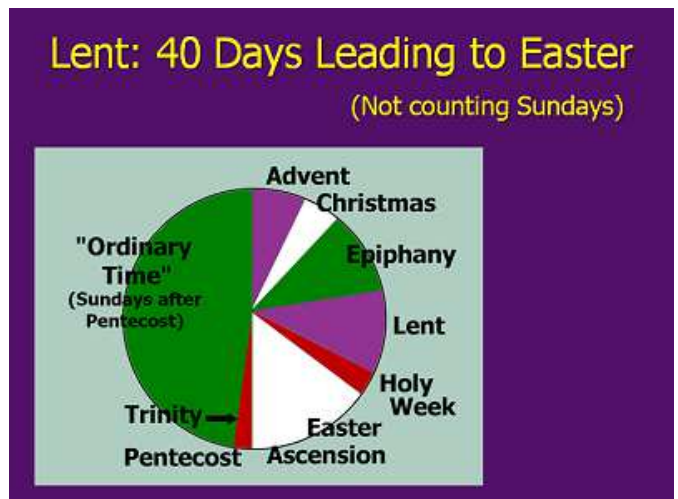


because they wrote Gospels) has his own "slant" on the story of Jesus — his teaching, his mighty acts, his death, and his resurrection. Each of them has his special material to work from, the reports and eyewitness accounts that have been handed down in their particular circles within the early church.

Luke is the only one who describes how he went about his work. At the beginning of his Gospel he addresses a man named Theophilus who, apparently, financed the writing and publication of Luke's work. Luke says, "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed

good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:1-3). So Luke includes a few things not found in the other Gospels, especially some of the most familiar parables of Jesus like the "Good Samaritan" and the "Prodigal Son." He follows the same general outline as the other Evangelists, but with variations he's picked up from his unique sources.

We've begun today with the account of Jesus' temptation, or testing, in the wilderness. The Gospels tell us that, after he was baptized by John, Jesus spent forty days in a remote place being tested by the devil. Those forty days are the model for the season of Lent which began on Ash Wednesday – forty days leading up to Easter, not counting Sundays. Traditionally, Lent has been a season of self-denial as Christian believers prepare to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord. There's nothing in the Bible about Lent — for that matter, there's nothing in the Bible about observing Christmas or Easter, either — but Christians have traditionally found these seasons helpful in taking them through the Gospel story of Jesus. So, really, they're a kind of educational aid to help us remember what the Lord has done for us. You used to hear people speak of "giving up something for Lent" — some special denial of pleasure such as not eating meat or sweets. That's been more the Catholic practice than the Protestant, but what Protestants have typically done during Lent is to augment their acts of devotion, such as the community Lenten services in which six Hamilton churches take part.



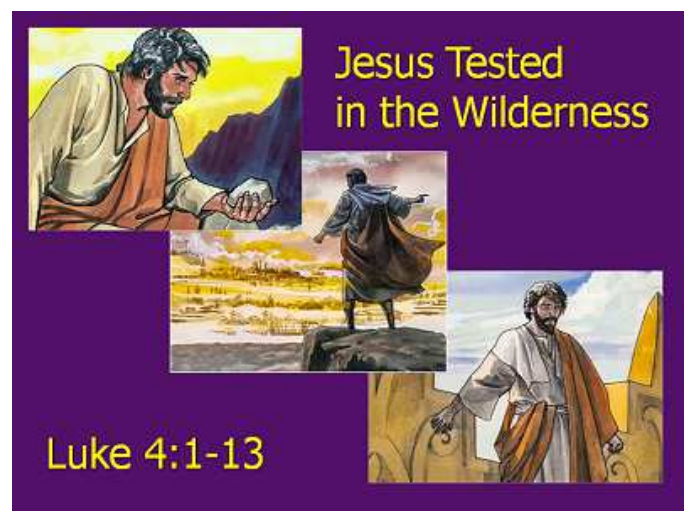
The temptation of Jesus, then, has been a model for the observance of Lent. But that word “temptation” isn’t the best translation of what Jesus went through. The Greek word is *peirasmos*, which means testing, a kind of ordeal. It’s not the kind of “temptation” we sometimes talk about, where we’re tempted, say, to eat something we ought not. When I was a child, my mother wasn’t the world’s greatest cook. That wasn’t her

fault, because my grandfather had died leaving my grandmother with several children still at home, and my mother had to go to work to support her mother and her two younger brothers, my uncles. So Grandma didn’t have much opportunity to teach my mother how to cook, and when I was growing up our supper table didn’t have a lot of variety. It seemed like every other supper the dessert was canned peaches, which Mother would serve with those vanilla wafers — you know, the kind made with the same kind of pastry as an ice cream cone. Once there was a guest for supper, and Mother offered him another of those wafers. “It’s a temptation,” the guest replied; and after that we kids always called those wafers “temptations.” But real temptation, or testing, is a far more serious matter than an occasional vanilla wafer!



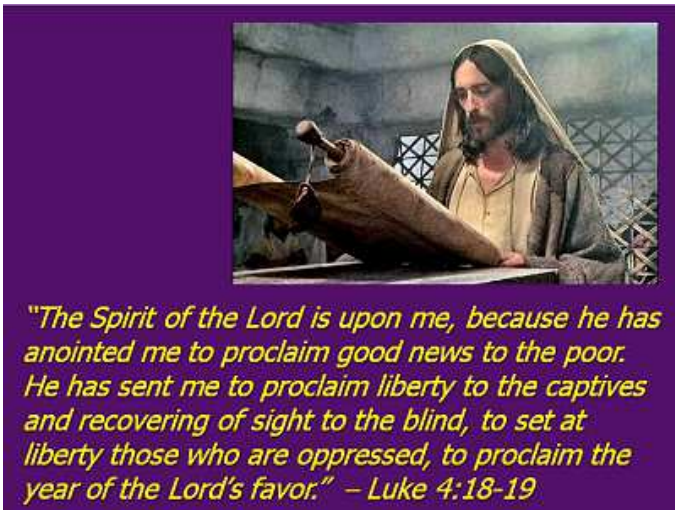
So Luke is describing that time of testing Jesus underwent in the wilderness. What kind of testing was it that the enemy placed before him? Let’s recall that Jesus has just been baptized; he’s heard the Lord telling him, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). That’s a quote from Psalm 2, addressed to the king of Judah. In other words, Jesus is being tested concerning *what sort of Messiah* he is to be. Think of the three possibilities the devil offers him: To solve the problem of world hunger caused by poverty: “Turn these stones into bread!” To solve the problem of warfare by ruling all nations, so there will be world peace: “If you’ll worship me I’ll put you in control of all nations.” To solve the problem of which religion is the true one: “Jump off the temple and let the angels catch you; then everybody will know you’re the Son of God, no questions asked!” How wonderful, we might think, if Jesus had accepted the devil’s offer! Then we wouldn’t have to deal with the economic inequalities that divide our troubled world. We could have been spared the ravages of warfare that have plagued mankind through history, and threaten to continue to do so in our own time. And we wouldn’t be facing the onslaught of radical Islam, for example, because the whole world would realize that the only true God is the Father of the Lord Jesus.

But Jesus doesn’t buy into any of these possibilities. For each of them he has an answer — an answer from the Word of God, in fact from the Book of Deuteronomy. Man doesn’t live by bread alone, but by the Word of God. People are to obey only the Lord God, not some earthly trans-national authority. And you can’t force God to validate you as the only source of religious truth or the only representative of the divine. The Jews of the first century had many ideas about what the Messiah, the Lord’s anointed, was supposed to be; but they all boiled down to a figure who would, somehow, vindicate Israel as the special people of God and free them from their exile under foreign domination. Jesus in his time of testing, however, looked deeply into the Word of God and *rewrote the book on Messiahship*. Drawing, especially, on



Isaiah’s picture of the Servant of the Lord who, by his suffering, brings forgiveness and redemption to God’s people, Jesus recast the story of Israel and its hopes around himself. As the Son of God he would do what no one — not even his own disciples — expected a Messiah to do, and through his teaching, his healing, his suffering, and his resurrection he would bring about the onset of the kingdom of God and the new creation.

How do we know what happened there, in the wilderness, as Jesus confronted the tempter? Nobody else was there to record the events. Jesus must have told his disciples of his struggle, and how he met the test. He must have done this so they, too, could meet the same kind of test with the same weapon, the Word of God. Are you and I, as his disciples today, ever tested with the temptations of a Messiah? Are we tempted, for example, to focus our efforts on putting bread on the table, so to speak — to concentrate on getting our material needs supplied — to the exclusion of building a life on the principles of the Word of God? It's a temptation to hold back on giving to others, or to the work of God, but Scripture is clear that when we act with generosity the Lord will bless us abundantly in return. Are we tempted to control other people, to manipulate them into doing what we want them to do, in the mistaken notion that by doing so we can eliminate strife in our lives? What a misguided expectation — that never happens, if we try it things only get worse! Are we tempted to answer the question, "Who really is God?" by saying, "It's all about me"? Self-centeredness is the dominant religion of our culture today. Yes, we're not Messiahs but we get tested just as the Messiah was. Praise God, we have the same weapon Jesus used to fight off these temptations. We have the Word of God, which Paul calls "the sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:17). We have the Word of God which, Hebrews says, "is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).



So in the account of his testing we see that Jesus has rewritten the book on Messiahship, and we see this also in what happens next when he's invited to read Scripture in the synagogue of Nazareth. This was Jesus' original hometown; people knew him, evidently, as the student of the Scriptures that all faithful Jewish men were expected to be. It was customary to invite a respected local man, or even a visitor, to read the Scriptures on the Sabbath. So the president of the Synagogue hands Jesus the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Now, the readings for each Sabbath were set by custom; you didn't just get to pick whatever passage you wanted to read. Notice, though, that Jesus instead unrolls the scroll to one particular spot he has in mind, what we now call chapter 61. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has

anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

How do you suppose the people of Nazareth heard these familiar words from Isaiah? "Scraping up a livelihood is such a struggle for us; how wonderful if we poor people could be prosperous! And what a great thing it would be if we captives of the Roman Empire, and Herod, Caesar's client king in Galilee, could have our national freedom once again! We're victimized not only by a foreign occupation, but also by sickness, blindness, vicious attacks of demonic powers — oh, could we not be set at liberty from these oppressing conditions! Let the Lord look with favor upon us, and deliver us! After all, hasn't Jesus just told us that this Scripture is being fulfilled right now?"

Yes, those would all be good things to have happen, and in his own way Jesus *will* do all these things; but when he quotes these words of Isaiah he does so with a twist. Why do I say that? Because of what Jesus leaves out at the end of the quotation. Isaiah wrote, "to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God" (61:2). Jesus leaves out the "vengeance" part — the part that promises Israel that God will avenge them for the harm their enemies have done. Jesus sees the task of Israel's Redeemer differently: not to punish the Gentiles for their oppression of Israel, but to lead Israel's return to the Lord's original purpose for his people — to be a blessing to all nations, to lead all people into the family of God.

At first the people in the synagogue don't seem to notice Jesus' omission. Luke tells us "all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth" (4:22). But that all changes,

because Jesus doesn't let the matter rest. He goes on to point out how the prophets of Israel defied current expectations. Instead of confining their ministry to the people of Israel, they reached out to Gentiles like the widow of Zarepath in Sidon, or Naaman the Syrian official. Jesus knows this reshaped perspective on the role of a leader of Israel is going to upset his audience, and states what has become a proverb, in Mark's version: "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household" (Mark 6:4).

As we might expect, the people of Nazareth aren't crazy about what Jesus has told them. They drive him out of town and try to throw him over a cliff. That's what *we'd* like to do, isn't it, to people who tell us things we don't want to hear? It's not comfortable to have your ideas challenged — as we've seen recently in our national political situation, and still witness in each day's news. And I'm sure you and I deal daily with similar situations in our personal relationships. But Jesus challenged the expectations of the people in his religious environment, and his challenge took him, eventually, to the cross.

Just as Jesus redefined the role of Messiah in his temptation in the wilderness, so also he redefined it in the synagogue of Nazareth. Yes, he did come as the Lord's anointed "to proclaim good news to the poor . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" — only not in the way his hearers typically understood. We see that in what follows, as Jesus moves on to Capernaum, where he apparently made his home from then on. There, once again in the synagogue, he teaches the people about the emerging kingdom of God. Luke says, "they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority" (4:32). He didn't teach like their usual teachers, the Pharisees and their scribes, who just repeated traditional doctrines because they had nothing new to say.

No, Jesus has heard a fresh word from the Father, a renewed insight into God's purpose as revealed in the Scriptures, and he speaks out of that authority that comes direct from the Holy Spirit. As he said in Nazareth, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me." And the Lord backed up that authority with action, for to everyone's amazement Jesus cast an unclean spirit out of a man. The man was under demonic oppression, and Jesus had compassion on him. But there was another reason Jesus had to cast out the spirit — because of what the spirit was making the man cry out: "I know who you are — the Holy One of God." Even if people don't realize who

Jesus really is, these demonic spiritual forces know all too well who he is, and that he's come to take them down! But it's too soon for this secret — what scholars have called "the Messianic secret" — to be exposed. As Paul says, if the authorities knew who Jesus was, "they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:8). Who Jesus really is must be kept hidden to all but those who believe in him, or the drama of salvation will not be played out according to God's plan. Who Jesus is will be evident when God raises him from death, but for now his hearers can only marvel because, as Luke says, "they were all amazed and said to one another, 'What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!'"

"Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown."

— Luke 4:24



"What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!" — Luke 4:36



So in closing, I would draw out two points from the narrative of Jesus' teaching in Nazareth and Capernaum. First, Jesus says the Spirit of the Lord is upon him to set people free from their captivity, a captivity not only to disease or oppression but also to false ideas about what God is up to. Jesus restores sight to the blind, but we can take that two ways: he can open blind eyes, but he can also open up our understanding to the truth. As he says in John's Gospel, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:9). And you and I, who have the same Spirit as Jesus, are called to the same task. We have the Scriptures from Jesus, and the Bible reveals the truth about God, about the realities we live in, and about us.

Secondly, Jesus teaches "with authority" and not with the traditional religious teaching of that time. We need such teachers in the church today, people who can do more than just mouth the traditional platitudes of "Christianspeak," the same old same-old that doesn't really connect with real life or even with what the Scriptures are really all about. We need teachers who can look into the Word of God and "speak with authority," bringing a fresh word based on a thorough understanding of what the Scriptural authors meant, and what their first hearers and readers understood them to be saying. I've tried to be that kind of teacher during my time with you, and I hope that when my tenure comes to an end you'll have found another who will continue that approach.



- Christians are called to set people free with the Word of God – like Jesus!
- The church needs teachers who can speak "with authority," from deep and genuine knowledge of the Word – like Jesus!

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