

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International
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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Luke 4:1-13

Year C - Lent 1, Text: Luke 4:1-13
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Jesus' Temptation in the Synoptic Gospels

In Mark's narrative, after Jesus is baptized (Mark 1:9–11) the Spirit drives Him into the wilderness where He spends forty days (Mark 1:12–13). During this period, Jesus is “tempted by Satan” (only three words in Mark's account).

Matthew's temptation narrative (Matthew 4:1–11) is much longer, and consists of three incidents. Luke's temptation narrative (Luke 4:1–13) also consists of three incidents, although the final two are in reverse order of those in Matthew.

Luke's temptation narrative is preceded by his version of Jesus' genealogy (3:23–38). While Matthew 1:1–17 traces Jesus' origins back to Abraham and David, Luke traces them all the way back to Adam. Luke's genealogy focuses on Jesus as a “New Adam” — a new beginning to the human race.

The Beginning of Jesus' Ministry

In His baptism, Jesus is anointed for His Messianic work; in His temptation, that work is put to the test. The temptations are not so much personal trials as they are a Messianic struggle. Will Jesus walk the way of a Servant-without-limit, or will He expect His Father to serve and deliver Him in miraculous ways from anything unpleasant? The implications of Jesus' temptations are profound (note Hebrews 2:17–18 and 4:15).

Verses 4:1–2: The Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness of Judea. (Luke delights in speaking of Jesus' total surrender to the Spirit!) While there, He no doubt meditates on His coming Messianic work. Some looked on the desert as the devil's haunt (see Tobit 8:3, an apocryphal writing). Jesus spends forty days in the desert, during which He eats nothing and is famished.

Verses 4:3–4: The devil now confronts a hungry Jesus and urges Him to prove that He is the Son of God by turning a stone into a loaf of bread. In other words,

resort to the miraculous to meet your own needs! Jesus refuses, pointing out that one does not live by bread alone; see Deuteronomy 8:3. Throughout His ministry, Jesus never does anything just to benefit Himself.

This first temptation presumes the presence of Jesus' miraculous powers. It challenges the implications and consequences of Jesus being prepared to be a suffering Messiah — and a servant of others without limit. However, Jesus will never yield to the prospect of seeking His own physical comfort and pleasure rather than doing the will of His Father.

Verses 4:5–8: Satan now offers Jesus dominion over “the kingdoms of the world” over which, he claims, he has been given authority. Lies! Satan has not been given authority over the kingdoms of the world; he has usurped it. He does not own them, and they are not his to give. No doubt Jesus was repulsed by Satan's suggestion. Jesus can see beneath the seductive shams of worldly systems to the delusions of sin.

It is significant that Satan suggests that Jesus seek political dominion over the world. The Jewish people of Jesus' day were hoping to achieve just that for themselves. In dealing with this issue, it is most important to understand the significance of the term “son of man” in Daniel 7 (see 7:13–14) and to understand how Jesus radically reinterprets that term in relation to His own Person and ministry. (The term “Son of Man” is used 82 times in the four Gospels. The Greek word for “gospel” [good news] is used 12 times in Matthew and Mark, but never in Luke or John.)

Jesus did not seek to dominate the world, but to serve the world and to establish an “upside down, back-to-front” servant-kingdom.

Verses 4:9–12: Luke's infancy narrative opens and closes in the Temple (Luke 1:4–2:38). The final verse of his Gospel speaks of the disciples being continually in the Temple blessing God (Luke 24:52).

The third temptation (according to the order of Luke's

Gospel, but the second event in Matthew's narrative) takes place on the pinnacle of the Jerusalem Temple. The pinnacle was at the southeast corner of the Temple area; 450 feet below it lay the Kidron Valley. Luke states that Satan takes Jesus to this location. Satan's temptation invites, "Be a popular Messiah! Offer a godly show of the miraculous and win the eyes and hearts of all in Jerusalem."

However, Jesus' way of winning Jerusalem was to walk the way of servanthood and suffering to the point of giving away life itself. Although the devil knows how to quote — but twist — scripture, Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. Salvation is not achieved outside the ordinary laws of existence, but within the normal, humble (and at times sorrowful) way of faith.

Verse 4:13: After the devil has finished every test, he departs from Jesus until an opportune time. As in other concluding lines, Luke prepares his readers for the future — for the final, decisive struggle with satanic forces in Jerusalem.

It is important that God's people understand Jesus' ministry as a battle with the demonic. The demonic says, "Live for self!" Jesus says, "Live to serve Me by serving those around you." What a difference! The more we understand this issue, the more we understand that the Lord's Prayer is really a war cry. Its final petition should read, "Deliver us from the evil one." More translations are now rendering that final petition in this manner (e.g., the NRSV). We would do well to ponder John 12:31 and 17:15, and to bear in mind that, in John's passion narrative, on the cross Jesus declares Himself to be the Victor and gives away His life as the ultimate servant act; see 19:30. Although Jesus gets crucified, Satan gets nailed!