

In 1937 Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: “It is becoming clearer every day that the most urgent problem besetting this church is this: How can we live the Christian life in the modern world?” It is still a pressing question, and one that every follower of Jesus must consider. How shall we live intentionally and faithfully in this world—a world with values very different from our own?

If I had to write a synopsis of the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, I would say that he was struggling with this very same question. Do I trust God or the devil? Do I give into temptation or resist? Do I accept the values of this world and forget what God has called me to do? How then shall I live?

It is in the asking of the question and in the search for an answer that our character is formed. We make the decision to trust in God or someone or something else, and our lives unfold accordingly. Throughout history people have wrestled with this same question.

When God first called Israel into a covenantal relationship as the people of God, this new nation struggled to learn how to live in light of such a high calling. They had no idea how to live as the chosen people of God. After Moses gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments, he had to tell them how they should behave in light of all that God had done for them. The prophet Micah asked, “What does the Lord require of you?” The answer was: “To seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” The prophets Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah summarized this calling in a similar fashion, constantly preaching about how those who love God should conduct themselves.

Throughout the New Testament people continued to ask how they should live. Luke tells us that after being baptized many people asked John the Baptist: “What then shall we do now?” (3:10) He told them that God’s blessing upon them should be manifested through their love for neighbor. Jesus said the same thing when Nicodemus and the rich young ruler asked him how they should live. Jesus combined the Old Testament answer from the Law with the answer from the Prophets: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Peter asked this question after the death and resurrection of Jesus and Paul asked it on the road to Damascus. The churches which Paul established asked it again and again. In Corinth, Galatia, Philippi, and throughout the ancient world these new Christians were waiting for the return of Christ and wondering: “How then shall we live?” As the church grew throughout the centuries various theologians wrestled with an answer. Ambrose, St. Francis, St. Augustine, Martin

Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, St. Julian of Norwich, Hildegard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, all continued to ask: “How do we live as the people of God?” And we continue to wrestle with an answer to that question today.

As we continue our journey through the Gospel of Luke during Lent this year, we find Jesus wrestling with this same question. Last week we considered his childhood and youth, and learned that there is virtually nothing written about him from the age of 12 until his baptism by John in the Jordan River at the age of 30. When Jesus is baptized the confirmation of his divinity is clear, as the sky opens up and the voice of God proclaims: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” It was a spectacular moment. But you have to wonder if Jesus thought to himself, “Yikes, what do I do now?” “What comes next?” “I know I am the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the one everyone is watching, but what exactly does that look like?”

Immediately after his baptism and blessing by God, Jesus is led into the wilderness to be tested. Just like Jacob, Moses, David and Elijah he spends 40 days in the wilderness. Here Jesus was tempted by the devil, and his temptation reminds us that when we wrestle with the devil we are wrestling with ourselves.

The first temptation was that of bread. Spending 40 days without food would be a challenge for anyone. It is difficult for us to really understand the power behind this temptation because most of us have never known true hunger, the sort of hunger that causes people to steal and kill. Jesus easily could have turned that stone into bread to prove himself. Yet he proved that the hunger of the body must be secondary to hunger of the spirit.

The second temptation was the offer of worldly kingdoms with all of their wealth and power. Jesus could lead Israel to world dominance and force his will upon the world, requiring them to bow down and serve him. But Jesus knew that allegiance to his way of life had to be based upon free choice and not coercion. It had to come from within a person and not outside of them. He resists the temptation to power and authority.

Finally he is tempted to prove that he is the son of God by throwing himself down from the Temple, so that God’s angels will take care of him. What better way to prove you are who you say you are than by putting God to the test? But again Jesus refused. Jesus essentially tells the devil—“You cannot break me down with bread, power, wealth or miracles. I know how I should live and to whom I belong.” He successfully resisted all of those temptations in the wilderness.

Yet his temptations were not over. Once he began his ministry, he would face a variety of temptations---to prove that he is the Messiah, to impress the Pharisees and Scribes, to be worshiped as a king. Even from the cross, when someone says,

“If you are the son of God save yourself,” he refused. He maintained his integrity and identity to the end.

After Jesus came out of the wilderness, he went into the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, most likely with family members present, and read from the prophet Isaiah: “The spirit of God is upon me because God has appointed me to preach good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, deliver the captives and recover the sight of the blind, and set at liberty the oppressed.” He should have stopped there--said Amen and walked away. But he goes on: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Meaning ‘I am going to do this, the spirit of God is upon me--Joseph and Mary’s boy.’ They are outraged. They have watched him grow up, known him his whole life--who does he think he is? It was intolerable. With one accord they rise up against him and turn him out of the synagogue and out of Nazareth. Luke tells us that they planned to throw him over a cliff, but he escaped and walked away. As far as we know, he never returned to Nazareth again.

Thus begins a remarkable 3 year ministry in the region around the Sea of Galilee. This ministry was characterized by a rapid succession of preaching, teaching, healings, exorcisms, and miracles that confounded everyone. Jesus was different from the usual prophet or preacher of his time. He had a special concern for the poor, sick and wounded, saying “Come to me all that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” And they came, gathering around him in droves--the maimed, the blind, the crazy--sometimes in embarrassing numbers in the hope that his healing hands or even his eyes might fall upon them and they would be cured. Every human misery was his concern, and he told his listeners it should be their concern, as well. He regularly did things that were widely interpreted as miracles--relieving the insane of evil spirits, restoring sight to the blind, telling the bedridden their sins were forgiven and there was nothing to stop them from getting up and walking. To deeply distorted bodies and minds Jesus offered not medicine, but forgiveness. When he relieved them of their shame and guilt he seemed to relieve them of their infirmities. Even the most violent of people bound by chains could be soothed by his presence.

His miracles are found in a surprising range of sources, not only in the Gospels, but a source outside of the Gospels. First century writer Josephus also wrote about the miracles of Jesus. Associated with him was a power over nature: he stilled the storm, walked on water, expanded the food supply and caused a fig tree to die by laying a curse on it, all of which involved manipulating the natural order. He also healed, enabling the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, the mute to sing and those who were "possessed by demons" to be cleansed or

exorcised. Jesus was said to have had this remarkable healing power which included the power to raise the dead. He brought three people back to life: the daughter of Jairus, whose story is told in Mark, Matthew and Luke; the raising of a widow's son from death in the village of Nain, told only in Luke, and finally the story of the raising of Lazarus, told only in John. This aspect of his ministry— healing, exorcism and miracles was beyond dispute and contemporary scholars universally agree that Jesus had this power. “Even scholars who reject the possibility of the supernatural still affirm that Jesus did things that were widely interpreted from the beginning as complete miracles.” (*Jesus A Short Life*, p. 84) His reputation as a healer and miracle worker was beyond dispute and is “...one of the most striking and stable points of consensus in Jesus scholarship over the last three decades.” (*Ibid*, p. 85) In these miracles Jesus was claiming his authority and demonstrating God’s promise in the in breaking kingdom of God. It was truly a remarkable thing, which was without precedent in antiquity. Writes John Dickson: “Nowhere else do we find a charismatic miracle worker whose miraculous deeds are meant to be the end of an old world and the beginning of a new one.” (*Ibid*, p. 87) Jesus would offer glimpses into the very nature of God.

And he did it by turning conventional wisdom upside down. It was the poor, not the rich who were blessed; the weak, not the strong who are esteemed; the pure in heart, not the sophisticated who understand what life is all about. We should love our enemies and pray for those who hate us. It is in living we die and in dying we live. It was a radical, revolutionary message that has, incredibly, stood the test of time. People in every age have been drawn to this humble man whose earthly life offered the most definitive answer of all to that age old question: “How then shall we live?” In three short years, Jesus showed us the way. Thanks be to God.