

## February 21, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Luke 4:1–13](#)

TITLE: **Devilish Distractions**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

At the risk of being scandalous, I don't think the last verse I read is actually true. Luke 4:13—*When the devil had finished every test, the devil departed from Jesus until an opportune time.* Luke is taking some dramatic license here, having the devil tempt Jesus as he begins his ministry and then supposedly disappearing from the scene until the end of the story when the devil entices Judas to betray Jesus and tempts Jesus not to drink the cup of suffering set before him. I get what Luke is saying, but in truth I think Jesus was tempted all the time. Jesus constantly faced temptations to do what was easy, comfortable, and expedient and avoid doing what was necessary, merciful, and just. Temptations never left him alone.

I think there's lots of evidence for this in the gospels. Early in his ministry, Jesus was praying by himself when his disciples told him that everyone was looking for him. Jesus could have re-joined that crowd and built up a mega-ministry right there, but instead he resisted that temptation and said we need to leave this place to go preach in other villages. Later he was speaking to a huge crowd when it became clear they hadn't eaten for quite a while. Jesus could have said he was taking a break and they should go find something to eat, but instead he chose to feed them himself from a few loaves and fishes. Another time Jesus was on his way to the home of Jairus, a leader of the synagogue whose daughter was gravely ill. Jesus must have been tempted to avoid any delay on this urgent mission for a powerful man, but Jesus did stop when an overlooked woman with a debilitating menstrual flow of blood needed to be healed and restored to a place of dignity in the community.

I don't think the devil ever truly left Jesus alone. In every moment of decision, I can imagine a constant voice whispering tempting alternatives to try and keep him from doing what was right. I'm sure it was annoying and unrelenting. And it is something we too are familiar with. For ultimately all spiritual temptations are distractions—attempts to distract us from who we are as children of God and disciples of a loving Savior.

I recently read an interesting article that pointed out how human attention is a finite resource.<sup>1</sup> It's true—in our finite lives there are only so many things to which we can give our attention. It's a zero sum equation. When you pay attention to one thing, you necessarily ignore something else. In addition, there is profit to be made by grabbing hold of your attention, whether through commercials whose loud volume pulls you in, pop up ads that re-direct your eyes, or the rabbit-holes of the internet that swallow you up until you suddenly realize that 30 minutes of your life have been wasted on a meaningless distraction. The article offered this very wise maxim: "*Attention is a limited resource, so pay attention to where you pay attention.*" (attributed to writer Howard Rheingold)

During this pandemic season, we have all become a bit stir crazy, right? We've been largely stuck in our homes; we haven't been able to socialize, see friends and family, or get out in the world nearly enough. That has led us to become distracted, antsy. I want to suggest a remedy for this—and since this is the first Sunday of Lent, this is a Lenten remedy. I want you to pay attention to where you pay attention. Rather than giving in to the lure of distractions, find time each day simply collect your thoughts and re-gain control over your attention.

Imagine for a moment that you are in your favorite museum here in Pittsburgh. Maybe you're in the Hall of Architecture at the Art Museum, the train room in the Science Center, or enjoying the orchid collection at Phipps Conservatory. Now here's what is special about these places. Museums don't collect things so much as they collect the undivided attention of their visitors. They are an oasis from the noisy, chaotic confusion of the world. They allow you to see things—important, beautiful things without distraction. Museums are not about their holdings, their collections. Museums are about moments in which you become collected, inspired, and attentive for a while.<sup>2</sup> Developing that skill is a spiritual discipline we all need to practice. For example, the writer-philosopher Iris Murdoch has written that prayer is not primarily about asking God for something. Prayer is not petition, but rather it is “an attention to God which is a form of love.”<sup>3</sup>

Do you see how this whole train of thought holds together? Human attention is a finite resource. Amid a world of persistent, devilish distractions, you need to pay attention to where you pay attention. Find moments to collect your thoughts, to focus on what is beautiful, just and good. Find time for prayer, for meditation, for giving attention to God that is a form of love. Because what you pay attention to shows what you value and reveals who you really are.

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, the devil's offerings were attempts to distract Jesus from what was important and who he truly was. The devil didn't threaten Jesus or try to wow him with acts of demonic power. The devil likely spoke quite calmly, rationally—trying to catch Jesus in a moment of weakness. This is roughly what he said: Temptation #1—Jesus, we all need things in this life, things to keep us comfortable and well-fed. Use power to get the material things you need. Temptation #2—Jesus, you want to motivate people into better ways of living together and doing things. Use political power with my help to accomplish those noble goals. Temptation #3—Rabbi, religion is important but it is stuck on traditions and changes too slowly. Do one dramatic act right now that will jump-start all you want to accomplish through the temple and church. Leap off this tower. Don't worry—the angels will protect you.

What the devil said was basically true and on some level even reasonable. But it was a distraction designed to tempt Jesus to become a powerful person by the world's definitions of power instead of being the Son of God by heaven's definitions of power. You know those definitions, where the weak are truly strong, the last are first, the meek inherit the earth, and a crucified rabbi becomes the King of Kings. Real power has never resided in weapons and violence; those are tools of fear and spiritual weakness that

only de-humanize us. Real power is in compassion, solidarity, and non-violent protest. We've seen the truth of this over the ages. From Mahatma Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau, from Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, from John Lewis and lunch counter sit-ins to flower power protests against the Vietnam War, from Rigoberta Menchu, Daniel Berrigan, Standing Rock activists and thankfully from many more. Peace activists don't let themselves get distracted from a message that proclaims: If you want economic justice, then pay attention to where the finances are going. If you want racial equity, then pay attention to what is valued and legally protected in society. If you want the benefits of a sustainable environment, then pay attention to how water is used or misused, how power grids are controlled or mismanaged, how air quality cares nothing about state lines or national borders—and let nothing distract you from the fact that we are all in this together.

Jesus didn't let himself get distracted there in the desert. All that the devil offered him were just self-focused temptations—feed yourself, make yourself a leader of others, grasp equality with God. Jesus never permitted himself to be distracted away from his solidarity with us, from his role as a shepherd seeking every lost sheep, from being the one who is the light of the world.

This first Sunday in Lent—on this, the Lord's Day—follow this line of thought one more time. All human attention is a precious, finite resource. That is why we need to pay attention to where we are paying attention. This day and every day find moments to collect your thoughts; focus on what is beautiful, just and good. Find time for prayer, which is an attention to God that is a form of love. God doesn't want you to be distracted or heavy burdened. God wants you to remember we are baptized children of God, created in God's image individually and collectively. And nothing should tempt us to ever be anything less than that.

What you pay attention to shows what you value and who you really are. So breathe. Look around. Collect your thoughts and notice what Christ would have you see. In this we are saved, made whole, upheld as children of a loving Creator now and forever. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie Warzel, "I Talked to the Cassandra of the Internet Age," *New York Times*, February 4, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of Love*, p. 333.

<sup>3</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 55.