

Britt Carlson
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11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

"Imitation of God"

Luke 4:1-13

My sister Paige and I were in heaven. We were staying at the house of some friends who were out of town this last year when we discovered that at our fingertips was the best-stocked pantry we'd ever seen. I mean, we were opening drawer after drawer of designer pastas and sauces and snacks. We walked out into the garage and there was a huge freezer filled with every kind of meat imaginable, and to my delight a supply of frozen marionberry pies that could last us a year. Paige is a great cook, and *I'm* a great eater so we were in heaven.

But then we started trying to actually cook. And our excitement quickly turned to surprise—of the unpleasant kind. Paige used some oatmeal—and had to spit it out. She looked at the date. It had expired seven years ago. I looked at a bar of chocolate. Expired almost a decade ago. The goat cheese in the fridge: it expired a year ago. The more dates we looked at the more we realized: almost all of this abundance was utterly unuseable, way past its use by date.

Our friends had stored up food against an uncertain future. And it all turned rotten.

In our gospel reading for today, we see Jesus, alone in the desert, facing the very extremes of what it means to be human.¹ He's been by himself for forty days. And not only has he been utterly alone, but he hasn't had a bite to eat in forty days either. There is almost nothing that speaks more deeply to human beings than food scarcity. It's no mistake that the *very first thing* the devil tempts Jesus with is a temptation so guttural, so bodily. "Just take things into your own hands Jesus. You're hungry. You're going

keep on being hungry. Just turn the stone into bread."

The devil's temptation, the temptation that our friends gave into, is the temptation for a certainty of our own making. It's fundamentally a desire to secure our future in a way God never meant for us to do.

See, my friends weren't the first to try to store up food for tomorrow. My friends' stockpile reminds me of another group of people who wanted to make their food supplies certain. The original storing-up-food-for-tomorrow folks were the Israelites. Now if anyone had a good reason to want to store food for the future, it would have been them. They had been wandering around the wilderness for 40 years. They couldn't farm. They were so food and water unstable that at one point they said, "Lord, did you just bring us out here to die of thirst! We should have just stayed back in Egypt and died there."

So the Lord provides. Every day, a fine, flaky bread the Israelites call manna appears on the ground. And every day they gather it. It is a miraculous provision—a sign of God's faithfulness to Israel.

But God gives them instructions. Do not keep the manna overnight. Gather and eat as much manna as you want for today. But do not keep it till the next day. After all, God has promised a new batch of manna every morning, so there is no reason to gather any more. Unless, of course, you want to be extra certain that you have manna the next day, just in case God runs out. And of course, some Israelites do try to keep it overnight, to rely on their own providence instead of God's, and what happens to the bowls

¹ Many thanks to Ben Dillon for his insights on this sermon.

of manna that they keep overnight? It rots and gets full of worms. Just like the abundance of food that Paige and I found in our friends' cupboards, it was unusable, past its date.

But the story of the manna holds something more profound than simply a warning not to hold onto food for too long. It tells us something about what it means to be Israel, to be God's chosen people.

What makes Israel, Israel, is that they are a people who are dependent on God's daily provision. By trying to store up food for tomorrow, they were denying their need to pray "Give us today our daily bread." The devil's temptation to turn stone into bread is a way of trying to circumvent the need to depend upon God. Trusting in the Lord and trying to gain certainty of our survival are mutually exclusive for Jews and Christians.

But Jesus, Jesus does what Israel was unable to do. Jesus *does* trust. He resists the devilish temptation because he is living his life in full communion with God, in full dependence on his Creator. So he falls back on the God's admonition to not store manna in the book of Deuteronomy: "Man does not live on bread alone." He breaks the cycle of trying to secure the future, and note this: he breaks it by quoting Deuteronomy.

Now let's pause for a second, why out of all of the possible books of the Bible would it be *Deuteronomy* that Jesus quotes to resist against diabolic temptation?

Deuteronomy might be one of the most boring books in the Bible. It does two things: 1) it expands the descriptions of the laws given to Moses at Mt Sinai ad nauseum. And 2) it repeats the same commands over and over and over. It does not make for scintillating reading.

But all that repetition is for a reason. Deuteronomy is repeating the story of God's amazing redemption so that Israel will not forget to be faithful to God in this new stage they're entering.

See, Deuteronomy is set on the banks of the Jordan River in the very last year of the 40 years of wilderness wandering. Right across from them—so close they can smell the milk and honey—is the Promised Land. These past five decades Israel has witnessed the Lord doing striking, amazing miracles. He sent the plagues on Egypt. He brought the Israelites across the Sea of Reeds with their hands full of the Egyptians' gold and silver. He provided the water and manna in the wilderness. He guided them with the cloud by day and the fire by night. The last 50 years have been a time when Israel's vulnerability was inescapable and their dependence on God's miracles complete.

But miracles are easily forgotten. And vulnerability is most often avoided. Moses knows this. So Deuteronomy begins with him standing across from the Promised Land saying *do not forget*. Do not forget you did not live by bread alone but by the word of God.

See, Jesus is living a life of full communion with God. And what does it mean for a human being like Jesus to be in full communion with God? It means acknowledging that he is fully dependent on God. To acknowledge that he has nothing that *doesn't* come from God. That to try to rely on his own human power, and not to trust in God to provide would be something less than human—it would be sin.

Do you know why this narrative about the three temptations is important for us? It's because the life of full communion with God, the life of complete trust and total reliance on God, the life that Jesus displays in the gospel, is the life to which we are all called.

In fact, this life of full communion and trust that Jesus displays is precisely the life that Moses is calling the Israelites to live out in the book of Deuteronomy. To remember God at all times. To remember that they are God's creatures. And as creatures, they are utterly dependent on God for what they have. But their dependence on God goes beyond the dependence of a creature on her creator. Even more than that, Moses reminds them that they are a redeemed people. God has freed them from bondage in Egypt, and called them to be a special people who are doubly dependent upon God as both creatures and as a people redeemed by the Lord from captivity.

Jesus reveals exactly what it looks like to be in full communion with God. By imitating Jesus, we can enter into our identity as a chosen people, obedient to God's word.

You know, we imitate a whole lot of imitations, knockoffs from the living God. We substitute fakes for the real deal—and here's the funny thing: the more fake our imitations are, the more tightly we cling to them. We do exactly what the Israelites did. We cling to our bread as it rots between our fingers. We cling to our youth and our good looks and our respectable jobs and our stable stock portfolios.

But the fact remains, none of those hold the power of life and death.

Jesus does what Israel and we have such a hard time doing: saying no to fakes. You see, in each of the temptations the devil is offering Jesus what Jesus already has. He offers Jesus bread, but Jesus is the Bread of Life. The devil offers all the glory and authority of the kingdoms of the world, but Jesus is the Son of God! The glory and authority of all kingdoms are Jesus' by birthright. The devil offers Jesus the chance to try to get God to save him, but Jesus knows God is faithful. Three imitations of real life and Jesus rejects them all.

Jesus is like my sister, Siri, who when you watch her in family home videos she's always popping up in front of the screen. Look at me! Look at me! Effectively blocking everyone in the background from sight. That's what Jesus does. Jesus in his perfect obedience to the Father gets in between us and rest of the world. He says look at me, look at me! But when Jesus tells us to look at him, it's not because—like my sister Siri—he's worried that others are getting more attention than him. No, Jesus tells us to look at him because in looking at him we see what it means for a human being to fully trust in God. To be fully human, like Jesus is fully human, means to reject the diabolic suggestion that we can rely on our own providence to get by in the world. It means not to imitate the Israelites, who tried to rely on their food hoarding, but to imitate Jesus, who says that we don't live on bread alone, but need the word of God to fill our needs.

What I want us to think about this week, once we've left this service, is where are we being tempted in the ways that the devil tempts Jesus. Who is promising us a certain future we were never meant to have? How are we being asked to compromise our full dependence on God, and instead to take a shortcut to safety, comfort and security? How are we being asked to use violence to achieve our ends? How are we being persuaded to use coercion instead of the humility and love of Jesus? Because when we turn to those things, instead of trust in God, we have already succumbed to the devil's temptations.

In a few minutes, Jacquie is going to read to us from a passage from Deuteronomy. The translation is by a professor of Judaic studies named Everett Fox. Fox grew up in a traditional synagogue where the Hebrew Bible is sung instead of just read. Hearing the Bible like that is key to understanding the Bible's stories, Fox believes, because the Bible, like many ancient texts, was designed to be sung and performed aloud. For Fox, understanding the Bible is like

listening to a musical performance where the performer matters as much as the script.

He says, “Everything depends on the ear of the performer. The score just sits there silently on the page and has no reality until the musicians start to play and give it some form.”²

As Jesus resists the devil, Jesus is singing the book of Deuteronomy with his very life. Jesus is giving us new rhythm and timbre and texture to the story of God and Israel that we have never seen before. For the first time, the song is being sung with perfect pitch. He is reading the notes off the score of Deuteronomy and breathing life into them. This is what it means that Jesus is the Word. Jesus is the *living* Word. The word sung. The Word walking and talking and roaming through the wilderness.

Jesus is like a teacher who sings a note, and then waits for us to sing it back to him. Jesus sings and then we imitate. Back and forth we go. The song and us, its holy imitators.

We imitate so that we can enter in to full communion with God. The communion we are called to have as God’s chosen people. We imitate the living Word so that we won’t be distraction by knockoffs and fakes. We imitate because we know that God provides enough for the day. We sing back to Jesus the song of his life because we are standing on the banks of the Jordan looking across to the other side. We sing because we have heard the Song and the Song has said, “Follow me.” Amen.

² Avi Steinberg, “Tinkering with the Word of God,” in *The New Yorker*. May 18, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/tinkering-with-the-word-of-god>