

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness have many meanings; I'll look at just a few here. (Even the gospel writers vary some in the details; for example, in today's reading, Luke does not have the part about angels ministering to Jesus after the 40 days; I really like that part of the story, compassionate angels!)

Some common parts of the story: Jesus went apart to a wilderness area for 40 days. Forty is a symbolic number in the Bible: It rained 40 days in the Noah's Ark story. The Israelites were 40 years in the desert. Moses was fasting on the Mount Sinai for 40 days getting the commandments. Elijah also is said to have fasted 40 days... and now Jesus fasts for 40 days. It's symbolic of a long time; It is a major testing time. And Jesus must have told his close disciples about that experience.

Temptation. Good synonyms are "Testing" or "Trial." (We can think of the Devil as an actual being, or it is quite plausible that Jesus was tempted or tested in his imagination... The temptations were in his solitary prayer life, in his inner thoughts, and even inner torment about what to do with his powers).

The first temptation was to appease hunger... not just his own hunger, but to create bread for all those who were poor, then they would surely follow him. But Jesus quoted a saying from a book of Moses ("Man does not live by bread alone") showing that we are not just flesh and blood, but we have the gift of life in our soul or spirit. Bread is a metaphor and a symbol in Jesus' world. Jesus had a higher mission than just to feed people: Jesus taught people about our hunger *for God*, He taught about "*spiritual bread*," and that He himself is this kind of "bread!" Our relationship with food can be a spiritual matter; Are we fully aware of what we really need, and what we just want, crave, or even have as an addiction? Moses, Elijah and Jesus and various saints through the ages, have

had an amazing self-discipline regarding food, and about ways to nourish ourselves *spiritually*! Jesus said “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger.”

Another temptation of Jesus that the gospels all relate is that of jumping off the top of a temple, to see if God’s angels will catch him and protect him from harm (words in Psalm 91). While it may be *possible* with God, Jesus quotes another word from the book of Moses, “You *shall not test* the Lord your God.” (You shall not try to “force the hand” of God... no twisting God’s arm!) There is also a problem of taking the words of the Psalms as literal. (Psalm 91 is poetry meant to encourage us, to live bravely in times of trial, but it makes no sense literally: “You who take refuge in God... no plague will come near your house, a thousand may fall at your right side, but it will not come near you, you will tread on the lion and the serpent, angels will catch you so you won’t bruise your foot on a stone???”) Jesus is clear that we cannot test God in that way, that life does contain suffering; we cannot throw ourselves off the top of a temple, or off a cliff, and ask God to make a sensational intervention. No, the laws of gravity will hold, just as the freedom of viruses and bacterial bugs will hold in this world, and the freedom of humans to choose evil and murder will hold.

A third, and very relevant temptation that Jesus told his disciples about was the temptation to power, the kind of power that dominates in the world. Jesus heard the words of the tempter, or Satan, promising a political power, over all the world... and it was on the condition that Jesus would worship Satan, who has this kind of worldly dominating power. Jesus probably was standing on a high hill in the desert, looking over all the lands, thinking he could use his power, and charisma to get control over all the leaders... but this is a kind of power that is dominating, coercive power! Jesus

was clear many times that any “kingdom” he had was not “of this world.” Pilate may have called Jesus a “king,” (King of the Jews), but that title was written on top of a Cross. Jesus’ cross showed that his power was love, a suffering, compassionate, relational, communal love. Jesus said that if he were a king in the *worldly* sense, that his followers would take up arms and fight.

The tempting or demonic words to Jesus in this temptation were: “Wouldn’t you like to be master of the world?” (sound familiar?) That plan has been tried by ancient brutal dictators like the Caesars of Rome, Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, Stalin in Russia, Mao Zedong in China, and countless other authoritarian regimes around the world, to this very day! Dictators conquer nations and peoples with fear and violence, bludgeoning those who express disagreement.... which is totally anti-Christ, a demonic temptation according to the gospels. Jesus said I will not worship your ways of domination and control, but I will only worship God and the ways of God. The ways of God clearly speak of non violence, not dominating and controlling, and of human freedom, creating peace through dialogue and understanding.

In sum, out in that wilderness, Jesus resisted temptations to miraculous bread, total physical safety, and dominating power. Instead, he entered the sufferings of his human brothers and sisters, walking alongside all of us with vulnerability and compassionate love. He did not follow worldly ways, but was loyal to God alone. We are called to Jesus’ Way. Amen.