

“Jesus Said 'No' So You Don't Have To” OR “Some Thoughts on Temptation”
2015 Lent: *I'm Not Okay*
Sermon on Luke 4:1-15 (2/18/15)
Jennifer M. Hallenbeck

Cute iPhone covers represent an area of personal weakness for me. I have had an iPhone for about three-and-a-half years...and, over the course of that time, I've probably gone through ten cases. And not because they broke or wore out. I simply found a new one I wanted and made the purchase – often spending \$40 in the process, just because I found something new and cute and different.

My most recent new iPhone cover is pale pink and it has the phrase “Speak of the devil” on it. When I saw this cover featured on my favorite iPhone cover website back in December, I knew I just *had* to have it. For irony's sake, of course.

The phrase “speak of the devil” is pretty common so it's a clever thing to put on a phone cover.

Plus, I think it's kind of clever for a *Christian pastor* to have a phone cover that says “speak of the devil.” See, I don't usually speak of the devil...it is not my job to speak of the devil. In fact, one could argue that it's my job to do just the opposite. So my current iPhone cover is meant to be very tongue-in-cheek.

I don't *like* to think about or to literally speak of the devil. I do not obsess over the existence of hell and I don't enjoy dwelling on the idea of evil in this world. I prefer, instead, to think and to speak about God's good and beautiful action in our lives. That always seems more spiritually beneficial to me: to focus on what is good and beautiful rather than on what is bad and harmful.

But there are stories in the Bible that force us to come face-to-face with evil and with the existence of powerful, negative forces. This evening's Scripture reading from Luke chapter four is a prime example of one such story: Jesus' temptation or *testing* in the wilderness. I don't like to literally *speak of the devil*, but tonight I have no choice.

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Jesus had just been baptized by John in the Jordan river. He was ready to begin his public ministry of teaching and healing – a ministry he knew would eventually lead to his arrest and to his painful death by crucifixion. He needed to be fully prepared for everything he was about to face in the coming months and years.

So he went to the desert and he fasted for forty days as a way of spiritually preparing himself...eliminating all worldly distractions in order to really focus on God's will for his life. The 40 days of Lent come, in part, from this very story.

As does the concept of a Lenten fast – of denying yourself something in order to focus on what's truly important spiritually.

As Luke tells this story, the devil tempted – or tested – Jesus throughout his 40 days in the wilderness. And the testing or temptation Jesus encountered was exactly what should have tempted him. He was fasting, he was hungry...so the devil tempted him with food. “Turn these stones to bread,” the devil said. “I know you can do it. You're God's Son for goodness sake. Give up your chosen fast! God won't care.”

But Jesus knew better. His chosen fast wasn't just about *not* eating. It was about coming to grips with his own dependence on God – and thAt dependence on God was for nourishment and strength beyond what food alone can offer.

Jesus was also tempted with pride...with a glory that wasn't from God. “I will give you the world,” the devil said to him. “All the kingdoms of the earth, anything you could ever want – if you'll just worship *me*. No need to humble yourself and bend yourself to God's will. No need to face the hardships of life and ministry. Take the easy route. Set your calling aside. Relax.”

You have to know this would have pulled at Jesus' own spirit. Life isn't easy. Teaching and healing in God's name can be rough sometimes. And Jesus was fully aware of how painful his calling would become. The devil was giving him an out.

How could Jesus *not* have been tempted by this offer? Yet, once again, he said, “No.” True worship belongs to God and God alone. No one else deserves it. But the devil wasn't done. Not yet. There was one more test...one more temptation.

“Jesus,” the devil said. “Wouldn't you like to know if God really cares for you? Wouldn't you like assurance that God will come through for you in the end? Why don't you throw yourself off the pinnacle of the Temple. Surely God will send a fleet of angels to catch you.”

With Jesus' awareness that death by crucifixion was his earthly destination, surely he would have wanted assurance that God would bring him final redemption...that his messy, painful death would have meaning and that God would be with him in the end. Surely Jesus would want that comfort and assurance. Yet, for the final time, he said, “No.”

A relationship with God is not about testing God...it's about trusting. Trusting that God *will* prove faithful in the end.

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As Christians, we believe Jesus was fully divine *and* fully human.

This temptation story was not a simple play he needed act out to make it look like he knew what it is to be human. No. This scene was real for Jesus and the devil knew just what would truly test him.

And, while it's dangerous to equate our own temptations and our own testing with *Jesus'* temptation and testing, the same is often true for us, too, isn't it?

When we find ourselves tempted – truly, painfully tested – it's with something that gnaws at the core of who we are and with the particular calling God has placed on our lives. Temptation and testing are unique to the ones being tempted and tested...and they are not just for the addicts among us.

We *all* deal with temptation and testing. No way around it. But what tempts and tests me may not be what tempts and tests you.

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This Ash Wednesday night, we begin a new worship series at McCabe – a series called *I'm Not Okay*. This series title and concept is being borrowed from Embrace Church, one of our sister United Methodist churches down in Sioux Falls.

Embrace Church did a three-week series called “I'm Not Okay” back in September and, when I mentioned it in a staff meeting, many of our staff members thought it would really connect with the people of McCabe. And that it would make a great series for Lent.

In our culture, we often believe we need to put our best foot forward, to show everyone we can handle anything that comes our way. When people ask us how we're doing, we shrug off the question with a simple, “I'm okay. Everything's just fine.” Even when we aren't okay and even when it isn't all just fine.

Sadly, all too often we Christians feel like it's especially important for us to show up at church all bright and shiny, as if life is always wonderful all the time. But it's not – and we all know it. Life is messy. Life is scary. Life is not always fine and we are not always okay.

So, this Lent, we're going to put that stuff out on the table. We're going to wear some of our dirty laundry here at McCabe over the next 40 days. We're going to get a little honest about many of the ways in which we are *not* okay.

In addition to tonight's focus on temptation, we're going to talk about doubt...we're going to talk about sickness...we're going to talk about worry and fear for the future...we're going to talk about the ways in which we judge ourselves and others...we're going to talk about loss and grief... and we're going to talk about how it feels when everything seems to just spiral out of control.

But, of course, in the midst of this Lenten journey with so many of the things that make us “not okay,” we will also be reminded that, come Easter Sunday, there is good news. By Jesus' resurrection from the dead, God promises that everything *will* be okay...eventually.

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Like my “Speak of the devil” iPhone cover, the first title option for this meditation is meant to be clever and tongue-in-cheek. Through the story of Jesus resisting temptation – and through his death and resurrection – the power of sin and death were defeated. So, it's just a little bit true to say that “Jesus said 'no' so we don't have to.” But it's only a little bit true. A very little bit.

There absolutely are times when it is in our best interest as human beings – and as beloved children of God – to say “no” when we find ourselves tempted with something harmful. And we have to know ourselves well enough to know what is truly harmful for us. Yes, there are some things designed to be spiritually harmful for everyone...but the things we'll struggle with the most are unique to us.

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Lent is a time of turning away from temptation and sin...it's a time when we truly acknowledge our brokenness and when we put our brokenness and sin before God and we say, “Please take this because I can't deal with it on my own. I need you to help me with it. I need you to redeem it for me. And I need my brothers and sisters in Christ to stand with me as I struggle through.” //

The ashes of Ash Wednesday harken back to the story of creation where God used the dust of the earth to create humankind. When Nurse Jane and I put the ashes on your foreheads you will hear us say, “From dust you came and to dust you shall return.”

This is not only a harsh reminder of our mortality...it is also a blessed reminder that we been God's beloved children from the beginning and that we will continue to be God's beloved children through the end.

We *are* children of dust. *God's* children. Beloved yet broken. Despite appearances and despite what we might say, we are not always “okay” and everything is not “just fine.” The ashes of Ash Wednesday call that to mind and we put it out there for the world to see: we...are...not...okay.

But we will be. Through Jesus Christ, God *will* make everything okay. Eventually.