

**Upon This Rock:
Stones to Food**

Luke 4:1-13

In the will of God, we will never go hungry.

A sermon preached by
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One of my new favorite Facebook groups is called River Valley Foodies. It's a random bunch of people mostly whom I don't know, but we share a common interest. We all like to eat, and we all live in or around Fort Smith. The group shares news and reviews on restaurants and culinary events in the River Valley. There are lots of good places to eat in Fort Smith and surrounding areas, and as the pandemic allows us to go out more freely, I plan to do some exploring.

I love to eat; it's as simple as that. My love for food makes it hard to diet and hard to fast. Fasting, although a recommended spiritual discipline for Lent, has always been difficult for me. I can fast from activities or even social media, and I do OK with forgoing chocolate or dessert during Lent. But really giving up food for any extended period of time tends to make me not holy, but cranky.

I truly admire and appreciate those for whom fasting leads to holiness. John Wesley fasted weekly. Many spiritual traditions recommend fasting. I discovered a quote this week from Sister Macrina Wiedekehr, a world-renowned spiritual director who lived at St. Scholastica here in Fort Smith. She wrote: "Fasting makes me vulnerable and reminds me of my frailty. It reminds me to remember that if I am not fed I will die. ... Standing before God hungry, I suddenly know who I am. I am one who is poor, called to be rich in a way that the world does not understand. I am one who is empty, called to be filled with the fullness of God. I am one who is hungry, called to taste all the goodness that can be mine in Christ."¹ Fasting is hard, but it can feed your faith.

Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness, which is one of the reasons we have Lent for 40 days. After the spiritual high point of his baptism, he was led by the Holy Spirit—Mark says driven—into a time of testing in the wilderness. At the end of 40 days, he was starving. This is clear evidence of the humanity of Jesus; even though he was "God with us," he felt the same pain of hunger that we do.

The last obstacle Jesus had to overcome in the wilderness was the temptation of Satan. This story is in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and Matthew says the devil came to Jesus at the end of the fast. Luke, however,

indicates that Satan was with Jesus for the entire 40 days. He had been tempting Jesus all along.

For his last shot, Satan has three specific tests for Jesus. First, he centers on his hunger. “*If you are the Son of God—maybe you are, maybe you’re not—command this stone to become a loaf of bread.*”² There is a mountain just west of Jericho that is thought to be the place where Jesus endured the Temptation. It is a stark and forbidding place; Jesus wouldn’t have had any trouble finding a rock to turn to bread. And wouldn’t that have tasted good? After 40 days without food, he wouldn’t even need butter and jelly!

But Jesus turned to Scripture, the Book of Deuteronomy, and answered Satan’s temptation: “*It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’*”³ The rest of the verse in Deuteronomy says, “*but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*”⁴

There were two other temptations in this last-ditch battle for the soul of Jesus. Satan took Jesus to the top of a high mountain and offered him dominion over all the kingdoms of the world, if he would only worship him. Jesus answered, again quoting Deuteronomy, “*It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’*”⁵

Then the devil flew Jesus up to the tip of the Temple Mount, a couple hundred feet above the pavement below. He challenged Jesus to fling himself off the Temple and see if God would protect God’s only Son. The devil even quoted Scripture to entice the Lord. But Jesus again reached into the storehouse of the Word and answered, “*It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’*”⁶

I’m not going to spend time with the second and third temptation today, but I wanted to mention them in order to get to the last verse of our text: “*When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*”⁷ Jesus had answered every test and had not given in to temptation. But any idea that the Satan was done with Jesus was sadly mistaken. Satan doesn’t give up.

During World War II, the American forces had been defeated and had to evacuate the Philippine Islands. As he was one of the last to leave, General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of the American forces in the Pacific,

uttered the famous words, “I shall return.” And he did—in victory. Satan also returned to Jesus, but never won the victory.

We have been talking in this sermon series about different kinds of stones. With Jacob, it was the stone of God’s presence. With Moses, it was the stones of the covenant in the Ten Commandments. With Joshua, it was the stones of passage into the Promised Land. And with Isaiah and Paul, the stone was Jesus Christ, the Cornerstone of our faith. Today we want to talk about how stones can become food. Not literally, of course, but the stones of life, the hard places we encounter, can actually become times of nourishment for our relationship with God. The stones of difficulty can become the food of faith.

We are all tested by hunger, hopefully not physical hunger, though many in our world and even in our community do experience actual food insecurity. In addition to physical hunger, we all have spiritual and psychological hungers that test us every day. We are hungry for meaning and purpose in life. We hunger to feel loved and worthy and significant. We long to make a difference with what we do. We are starved for real, deep, loving relationships.

We are tempted to try and find nourishment for our hungers in destructive and even demonic places. We try to find significance in wealth, satisfaction in power, love in sex, and happiness in sin. And none of that works, because it’s just wrong. It’s like trying to fill our hunger by eating gravel.

But the Word defeats all temptation to destruction. By the Word, Jesus defeated the temptations of Satan. By the Word, we can turn stones to bread. We can make the hard times nourish the health of our spirits. By the Word, we can turn the tests, temptations, and trials of life into our triumph.

This can be so because the Word communicates the will of God. When we are living and walking in the will of God for our lives, we can never grow hungry, because God is always filling us up with good things. So as we seek to live in the will of God, what’s good to eat? What can satisfy our hunger?

The Word itself can stop hunger in its tracks. We can resist temptation the same way Jesus did—by knowing the Holy Scripture. Paul wrote to Timothy, “*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for*

reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”⁸ If you want a bulwark of faith against the trouble of this world, live in the Scripture.

Many people have found strength in Scripture through the pandemic. Generally, we have had more time to read the Bible. The American Bible Society and Harvard University teamed up to do a survey of the difference Bible reading has made in the last year. What they found was not surprising. The more people read the Bible, the higher they scored on a measure of hopefulness. There was a measurable difference in well-being and happiness that directly correlated to the frequency with which people read Scripture.⁹ That’s not surprising, but it is important information. If you want to turn your stones to bread, feed on the Word of God.

We can turn our stones to bread by spending time with God. Make time to pray, and spend time listening to words or music or reading books that lift your spirit into God’s presence. This will help you cope with your difficulties. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, preparing himself for ministry. Throughout his teaching time, he took time to go away and pray and spend time with his Father. This kind of hunger for relationship opens us up for a time of blessing. As Jesus said in the Beatitudes, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”*¹⁰ The Psalmist expressed the same thought this way: *“For [God] satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.”*¹¹ Or you can sing it in the words of the old gospel hymn, “Take the name of Jesus ever, as a shield from every snare. If temptations round you gather, breathe that holy name in prayer.”¹²

Two things that I have added to my prayer life during the pandemic have been devotionals that I listen to on my phone. I walk early in the morning, since I quit going to the gym last spring, and I found it was much healthier for my spirit to pray while I walk rather than listen to podcasts on politics—go figure! I have found two that I really enjoy. One is called “Lectio 365,” and the other one is “Pray as you go.” Each one is about 10 minutes long and includes prayer, Scripture, a devotional message, and music. I find if I

am walking, and the sun is rising, and the Word is in my ear, I am starting the day off in a good place.

The third way we can turn stones to bread is in community. Discipleship is not a solo act; faith is done best in a group setting. We need other people to walk this pilgrim way with us. This was the secret of the early church. The first report from the Christian community, even before they were called Christians, was that “*they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*”¹³

That’s been the secret of the church ever since. That was the genius of the Wesleyan movement—the community built in the small group setting of the class meeting. That’s why you get this word of instruction in the Letter to the Hebrews: “*Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.*”¹⁴ The people of God are, by definition, a community. And that has been hard lately. We have had to express our community in different ways in order to stay safe. We had Zoom gatherings, Facetime calls, and kept in touch by phone and text and email. And that’s all good. But it’s not the same as in-person, is it?

I don’t know what community is going to look like post-pandemic and post-social isolation. We’ve been connected virtually but disconnected physically for a significant amount of time, time enough to form new habits. I don’t know how all that will work when all the restrictions are gone—which they soon will be, I believe. But I know that it is still going to be important—maybe more important than ever—to be together in community. One of our big challenges as well as a major focus coming out of the pandemic is going to be getting our people back together.

Finally today, we can resist temptation and turn our stones to bread by our good works. We can be about lives of service, doing the mission God calls us to do as individual disciples and as a church. We are not saved by good works, but good works are evidence of our salvation. We satisfy our spiritual hunger by serving our Jesus. We fill our faith by emptying ourselves for God’s Kingdom.

The Word is all over this. Ephesians tells us, “*we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*”¹⁵ Jesus says in the sermon on the mount, “*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*”¹⁶ And his last parable in Matthew is all about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, welcoming the stranger. This is the punch line of the parable: “*Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*”¹⁷

If you find yourself famished, struggling with the hard places of life, and all around you is a field of stones, here’s how you turn those stones to bread: Live in the Word. Spend time with God in prayer. Engage in meaningful Christina community. And give your time, energy, and talent to serving God and others. And the devil will have no chance with you.

As I said, Satan did not leave Jesus alone after their conversation in the wilderness. The first temptation was not the last. That last temptation came in the Garden of Gethsemane as the fate of Jesus loomed large in the night. Jesus prayed for hours, tempted to ask God to remove the cup of crucifixion from him. Who would not want to avoid the agony of the cross? I think Satan was there, waiting to see if Jesus would finally abandon his mission. But you know what happened. He stayed true. He finally prayed, “*Not my will but yours be done.*”¹⁸

In that moment, Jesus was victorious. In that moment, evil, sin, and death were defeated, and planet Earth was saved. In that moment, Jesus stayed in the will of the Father, and God gave him strength for his death and resurrection. God turned his stones to bread.

If you stay in God’s will, you will never go hungry. The stones of life will become bread for the journey, through the Word, prayer, community, and service. This is how you resist temptation, conquer evil, beat the devil, and win the victory!

¹ Macrina Wiederkehr, *A Tree Full of Angels* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 36.

² Luke 4:3.

³ Luke 4:4.

⁴ Deuteronomy 8:3.

⁵ Luke 4:8.

⁶ Luke 4:12.

⁷ Luke 4:13.

⁸ 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

⁹ Adam MacInnis, "When Covid-19 Hurts, The Bible Brings Hope," *Christianity Today* (January/February, 2021), 59.

¹⁰ Matthew 5:6.

¹¹ Psalm 107:9.

¹² "Precious Name," *United Methodist Hymnal*, #536.

¹³ Acts 2:46-47.

¹⁴ Hebrews 10:24-25.

¹⁵ Ephesians 2:10.

¹⁶ Matthew 5:16.

¹⁷ Matthew 25:40.

¹⁸ Luke 22:42.