

Matthew 4:1-11

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written,
 'One does not live by bread alone,
 but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,
 'He will command his angels concerning you,'
 and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
 so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Matt. 4:8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
 'Worship the Lord your God,
 and serve only him.'"

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

JESUS' TEMPTATION AND OURS

When I've preached on this passage in the past, I've talked about the fact that Jesus was tempted just as we are tempted. And so his time of testing in the wilderness became a kind of example for us. These are the ploys that the devil will use when he tempts us, and we need to get ready to resist temptation.

That's not a bad way to preach on this passage. The Bible does say that Jesus was tempted just as we are tempted, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4.15) Jesus in his temptation identifies completely with humanity and so he is able to bring us hope in a way that we can understand.

But, today I want to look at this passage from a different perspective. Perhaps these particular temptations are in some ways unique to Jesus. After all Jesus faces this time of testing by himself in the wilderness. The temptations were unique to his situation and his mission.

On the other hand this does not mean that the temptation story is somehow less important. Jesus wanted his disciples to know about it. Otherwise we would have no record of the temptation. And the writers of the New Testament wanted us to hear this story. The temptation story is found in all three synoptic gospels.

But, the temptation story like all stories in the Bible looks a lot different depending upon whom we identify with in the story. For example, take the story of the prodigal son. If you see yourself as a prodigal, you will like the story. But, if you see yourself as the older brother, you won't like this story at all. You will think it is unfair that the father gave such a big party when that good for nothing son came home.

The same is true with this passage. Whom you identify with will color your view of the story.

But, if you've been paying attention, you realize that in our story for today there are only two people that we can identify with, either Jesus or Satan. Usually, we identify with Jesus or at least we try to live up to what Jesus did in some way.

TAKING THE ROLE OF THE DEVIL

But, suppose we identified not with Jesus but with the devil. Now don't misunderstand. I'm not suggesting that we play the devil's advocate! On the other hand, is it possible that in our wilderness we sometimes ask the same questions of Jesus that the devil asked?

These past few weeks we've been talking about the confession of Peter. When Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter came up with the right answer. He said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

But, then Jesus began to talk about the Messiah as a suffering servant. Not only would Jesus take up a cross, he wanted his disciples to deny themselves and do the same thing. What kind of Messiah was this? It was not the kind of Messiah that Peter wanted. And so Peter rebuked Jesus.

And what did Jesus tell Peter? The Bible tells us that Jesus rebuked Peter and said,

"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Notice that these words are very similar to the words that are spoken by Jesus to the devil in our lesson for today. Jesus finally dismisses the devil by saying, "Away with you Satan."

The devil can meet us in the wilderness of despair, but the devil can also meet us in our best friends and supporters. The devil can even be us!

If Peter, that rock upon which the church was built, can play a cameo role as Satan, perhaps we can too. Perhaps we too can set our mind on human things instead of divine things. Perhaps we too can interpret the role of Jesus in a way that doesn't do the work of the kingdom but instead promotes the work of the evil one.

DOUBTING THE VOICE FROM ABOVE

The sixty-four dollar question of course is: How can we avoid doing that? How can we not only make sure that Jesus is on our side but also that we are on his side?

If we are to avoid temptation it is critical that we do not assume that we know all the answers about Jesus but are instead willing to really listen to Jesus.

The temptation of Jesus revolves around two pivotal questions, "Is Jesus the Messiah? And if Jesus is the Messiah what kind of Messiah will he be?"

The devil suggests that Jesus may not be the Messiah. Yes, Jesus you've received the Spirit and the voice from heaven has said that you are the chosen one.

But, is that really true? Is that voice really coming from heaven or is it just wishful thinking?

If you are the Son of God, then prove it.

Do this. Do that. Do what I want.

The devil is trying to get Jesus to doubt the truth that comes from above. It is the work of the devil to redefine the work of Jesus in a way that is more compatible with the ways of the world.

And when we invoke the name of Jesus and then redefine the message in terms of what we want instead of what God wants we do the work of the devil.

Let's look at the ways Satan does this.

THE TEMPTATION OF HUNGER

First, Satan appeals to hunger. The devil says, "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread." Why was this tempting? Well, Jesus was hungry.

Jesus had been without food for forty days and forty nights. He was literally starving. In fact it is amazing that he was still alive.

It is tempting to equate God's work with having our needs met when we are starving. A time of hunger is inevitably a time of temptation. That's true for all of us.

If we have some great hunger in our life, a need for healing or money or companionship, then we are tempted to find a Savior who will meet those needs. We put Jesus to the test.

We tempt Jesus by saying something like, "Lord, if you're real, meet my need. Turn these stones into bread. Heal me. Bring that special person into my life."

Some people even say that if we don't get a "yes" to our needs then there is something wrong with our prayer life. Maybe we're not praying enough or having enough faith. We hold the Messiah hostage to our demands.

Now it's important to note that Jesus demonstrated in the way that he lived that he cared about the needs of people. He healed people from morning to night.

He multiplied the loaves and the fish so that hungry people could eat. He had compassion on the people who were as he put it, "like sheep without a shepherd."

But, often the people Jesus loved couldn't get the bigger picture. They couldn't understand that those healings and those feedings were signs of a greater, eternal hope.

The choir sang an anthem recently that got at this message. We sang, "My faith is not in the healing; it's in the healer." That's true.

We need more than bread. We need the bread of life. We need the satisfaction that can only come from God's word as revealed in Jesus.

There is a hunger in our life that even the blue plate special can't satisfy.

OLD TESTAMENT ECHOES

By the way, there are Old Testament echoes in this story. Moses was on Mt. Sinai for forty days and forty nights and the Bible tells us that he neither ate bread nor drank water while he was on the mountain alone with the Lord.

But, Moses didn't starve. Why? God sustained him. And it was Moses that Jesus cited when he told the devil that man does not live by bread alone but by God's Word. (Deuteronomy 8:3)

As we saw last week in the passage on the transfiguration, Matthew sees Jesus and Moses together. Moses was an example of a true leader, a true king. And Jesus is seen as a king like Moses.

Now we don't think of Moses as a king, but the first century Jews did think of Moses in this way. Moses was seen as the antidote for the poisonous history of mainly evil kings who ruled God's people for many years. Those kings served themselves and sought personal glory. They sought the kingdoms of this world and all their splendor.

But, Moses learned the humbling lesson of manna in the wilderness. (Deuteronomy 8:1-2) Moses learned to trust in God alone.

And now Jesus, the Son of God strides into the wilderness with the same message. Bread alone is not the answer.

Don't try to hold Jesus hostage to your hungers.

If healing comes into your life, by all means praise that healing as a gift of God, a gift that foreshadows that great day when there will be no more suffering or pain. If you are blessed with a good job and financial stability, by all means praise God from whom all blessings flow.

But, don't think that God's kingdom and God's salvation is limited or defined by our good fortune. The Creator sustains all of creation on a daily basis. And there is a salvation; there is a hope that goes well beyond the hunger of the moment.

Our good fortune or lack thereof is not the measure of God's salvation. And if we try to make that the measure of God's salvation we are playing the role of the devil.

THE TEMPTATION OF SUCCESS AND SECURITY

The second temptation is like the first. The first temptation is the temptation to measure Jesus by what he can give us, the power of bread (literal and figurative). The second temptation is the temptation to measure Jesus by what he can show us, the power of success.

Why do you think Jesus might have been tempted to play Evel Knievel from the pinnacle of the temple? It would have been an easy way to gain converts. Satan suggests that God's kingdom is measured by how many people are wowed by Jesus.

And Satan even has Scripture (taken out of context of course) to justify his position.

Many people today judge truth by popularity. A powerful church is a large, financially strong church. A weak church is a small, financially struggling church. And in a desperate attempt to look strong we bend over backwards to impress, to be the church of "what's happening now" as comedian Flip Wilson used to put it.

Of course, at the heart of this desire to be successful is a fear of vulnerability. We want to be successful so that we can insulate ourselves from the dangers of the world. After all, as Satan put it, doesn't the Scripture say that God is on our side? Doesn't the Scripture say that God will not allow his Messiah to be harmed?

We too can justify our seeking after success and safety with Scripture taken out of context. But, spectacular success and safety is not the measure of Jesus nor is it the measure of the church.

Indeed in the season of Lent we take 40 days and 40 nights to remember that the way of Jesus is the way of the cross. The measure of the kingdom is the measure of faithfulness. The measure of the kingdom is the willingness to do God's will even though all desert us.

This is difficult for us to accept. We would rather be popular. We would rather have the power and security that comes with success.

We can have those things, but they will not tempt Jesus. Jesus said don't put God to the test of safety and success. The pinnacle of spectacular success does not describe the Christian faith.

THE TEMPTATION OF POWER

Finally, there is the temptation of political power. Satan took Jesus to a high place where he could see the glory of all the kingdoms of the world. And Satan said, "If you will worship me, if you will do it my way, all this power will be yours."

The worst thing to ever happen to the Christian faith was its acceptance by the Roman government. Politics and religion were joined at the hip, and we have been struggling to separate them even since.

You see the goals of the state are often at odds with God's goals. Actually, this was a problem even before the time of Jesus.

In the Old Testament we see the abuse of power in the name of religion. The Israelites replaced God with a king. They replaced the worship of the one true God with the worship of many gods. And they sought their own comfort over a society based upon compassion and justice.

They believed God was always on their side.

They fought many wars in the name of God. And in the end God's people suffered many setbacks because of it. They were in Exile literally and figuratively because of their disobedience.

The same thing has often happened to Christians. We have substituted Christendom for Christ. But, the two are not the same.

William Willimon wrote,

"There are few powers that we modern people recognize more strongly than political power. We live in a world in which it is wrong to expect your child to die for religion, but it is not wrong to offer your child to die for the government.

For most our government is the source of meaning, protection, and ultimate security. Wouldn't this be a wonderful power for Jesus to have?"

Actually, many of us try to give Jesus this power. We talk about God and country as if they were the same thing.

Now don't misunderstand. There's nothing wrong with loving your country.

There is something terribly wrong when we deify our country. There is something terribly wrong when we try to tempt Jesus to be our military Messiah instead of the suffering servant that he has revealed himself to be. That's idolatry.

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You see Christianity is not about the love of power. Christianity is about the power of love. There is a world of difference. The power of love is the power of one who voluntarily becomes weak. It is the power of one who voluntarily gives up everything for the sake of the one that is loved.

This, the Bible tells us, is what Christ did for us on the cross. And if we are to follow him on that road, we must learn that way of downward mobility. We must learn, as did the Apostle Paul that whenever we are weak, we are strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10)

If we are to follow Scripture's command to worship God and serve God only then we must align our ways with God's ways.

Instead of attempting to lord it over others we must find a way to serve others. Instead of trying to dispose of our enemies we must learn to love them and do good to them.

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

The devil left Jesus after these temptations. And then angels came and ministered to him.

In our time of testing we need to remember that the angels of God are never far from us.

When we are tempted to measure Jesus by the power of bread, success, or political power we need to remember this story.

God's angels, God's messengers of peace and good will are not far away even in the wilderness of our temptation.

When we trust in the fact that God has promised to provide for us in every way, the trials of the wilderness will not defeat us. We will not be tempted to make Jesus into something that he is not. We can clearly see and hear the good news of salvation.

Overcoming temptation is not a once and done thing. In Luke's gospel the Bible tells us that the devil left Jesus until he could find an opportune time, a better more vulnerable time to test him. The greatest temptation of Jesus was yet to come.

And that's how it happens with us as well. Each new day is opportunity to be led by the Spirit through the wilderness to the light and glory of God's grace. And each new day is a test, a temptation to mistrust the goodness of God and settle for the ways of the world.

What about you? Are you playing the role of the devil? Are you telling Jesus what he should do and how he should be? Or do you have the courage to simply follow Jesus wherever he leads?

It is never easy or simple for any of us. And that is why we often pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Amen.