

Jesus Goes on Retreat
Matthew 4:1-11
March 5, 2017 – First Sunday in Lent

The temptation story of Jesus is traditionally the lectionary for the first Sunday of Lent; and I find the temptation hugely important, not so much on a spiritual or doctrinal level, but because they help us understand the human side of Jesus, and thus they paint a picture of someone we can relate to on a personal level. Their placement in the gospel narrative is critical. They follow immediately after Jesus' baptism by John in the River Jordan. You might remember, Jesus has come up out of the water and "suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt 3:16-17) The very next thing in the Gospel – we read: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights. . ." (Matt 4:1-2)

Now picture this. . . Jesus is thirty years old. He has inherited a very successful carpentry business from his father. All in all, life is going pretty well. But. . . He senses a certain emptiness. He senses something is missing. He senses that he should be doing more. He hears that his cousin, John the Baptist, is doing this spiritual thing – speaking of freedom from sin through the reordering of one's life and being washed clean in the river; and Jesus goes to investigate. Upon arriving, he insists that John baptize him; and there God claims him as his very Son, in a dramatic fashion. Now, yes, Jesus was the Son of God from his very birth; but the fact is, that claim laid fallow for the first thirty years of his life. Now, suddenly, in dramatic fashion, the Spirit alights on Jesus, and he receives a divine call – the call that would change the world.

Can you imagine? We've already talked about what the call looked like. It was a call to buck the Roman order. It was a call to be counter-cultural. It was a call to serve the poor, the marginalized, the homeless, the ill at the expense of the well-off, powerful, aristocracy. It was a call to lift women to a place equal with men. It was a call to lift foreigners to a place equal with Jews. It was a call to preach the love of God and in so doing to really shake up the world. This was not an easy call to answer. Jesus had to know from the beginning that answering this call meant first becoming an itinerant preacher, walking the country-side, depending on the good will of others for food and shelter. But more importantly, Jesus had to know from the beginning that answering this call meant putting his very life on the line, because answering this call was not going to make him very popular with Rome.

And so, I like to think of the temptation stories as Jesus' Spiritual Retreat. Jesus receives a sense of divine call; and Jesus needs some time to sort this all out;

so Jesus retreats into the wilderness, into the desert, to spend some time by himself, to decide what he will do with this heavenly calling. Is Jesus tempted? Of course he is; and I tell you – probably his biggest temptation was to go back to Nazareth, back to the carpenter’s shop, ignore the dove from heaven and the heavenly voice, and continue business as usual. After all, it’s not a bad life.

Ever been there? I have. At the point that I decided to enter the ministry I turned down a couple consulting jobs paying well into six figures. Was I tempted? You bet I was; but we do not live by bread alone; and I felt the strong calling to preach the Good News of God’s Amazing love.

But enough about me. . . The Bible reports that Jesus was given three temptations. The first is bread. The devil tempts Jesus to use his power to provide for his physical wellbeing, we might even say his wealth. Failing that, the devil tempts Jesus to use his status as the Son of God to self-direct, to follow his own path instead of the path that God has chosen. Finally, the devil tempts Jesus with a promise of power and authority. Why should Jesus be so humble as to live the life of an itinerant preacher and ultimately die on a cross when he can have all the power in the world? Promises of wealth, of self-direction, of power. . . those are powerful temptations. But Jesus said, “No.” Jesus quotes scripture to his adversary: “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”(Matt 4:10) Then the devil left him, and the angels ministered to him.

The story of the temptation. . . I generally don’t put a lot of stock in the dualism of heaven and hell or God and Satan. I generally resist the personification of evil – casting evil as a devil or Satan. But, having said that, I have no doubt that evil and temptation are very real; and we, as children of God, are called to resist them every day of our lives. And so, I find a certain assurance in knowing that even Jesus faced temptation; and I remind myself of his command to “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

So where does this all leave us this Lenten Season. It leaves us with the knowledge that Jesus truly understands the power of temptation – the temptations of wealth, of self-will, and of power. And I believe it leaves us with a calling of our own. When faced with temptations that are beyond the will of God, it leaves us with the calling to “Worship the Lord and serve only him.” And it leaves us with the knowledge that Jesus understands and forgives when we might yield to our temptations.

If Lent is about anything, it’s about strengthening our relationship with Jesus Christ. It’s about turning away from the old temptations and seeking a closer more meaningful life in love and service to the Lord. And that’s why we start Lent with communion. This meal is also about relationship. It’s about putting the past temptations behind us, experiencing God’s forgiveness, experiencing God’s grace, and coming into an ever closer relationship with Christ.

Remember those words. . . “One with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.” That’s a divine call. That’s Christ’s call to us.

Let us pray. . .

Lord,
How often we are tempted but the things of this world.
Help us to put the temptations aside,
and answer your call to worship and serve only you.
This we pray in your holy name.
Amen.

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