

Leaving Temptation Behind
Matthew 4:1-11
February 18, 2018 – First Sunday in Lent

Friends, welcome to Lent. By now you know that we are in the year of Mark. You may not be aware that it is tradition within the Christian church to preach on the temptations of Jesus on the first Sunday of Lent. I've already told you, the temptation story in Mark is exactly two verses long: "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty day, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." I stated a couple weeks ago that I believe the temptation of Jesus was a very real thing; and I believe the ultimate temptation was to forget this Son of God "stuff," return to the carpenter's shop, and continue business as usual.

But, just for today, let's set Mark aside, and back up to the more elaborate temptation story in Matthew which you just heard read. I take Mark's temptation story fairly literally. It's historically quite believable; because, I know if I had just had the baptism experience that Jesus had, I'd need some time by myself, to think, to pray, and to sort things out. I also know, I'd be very tempted to forget the whole thing and return to business as usual.

However, I don't take the story in Matthew quite so literally. I don't imagine Satan as a physical presence, a guy in a red suit with a tail and a pitchfork. Rather, I see Satan as the spiritual presence of evil, an evil force, I might even say, to use the Star Wars analogy, "the dark side." Indeed, I see Satan as "the tempter." I spoke a few weeks ago about the evil spirits in our twenty-first century lives. Do you remember them: "you're not good enough"; "you should have done something different"; "you can get away with it"; "they are bad people" – all of them those little evil voices in the backs of our heads. And Satan is the king of those evil spirits. I might even say that I can wrap them all up together and call them Satan.

And, as I don't believe in a physical personification of evil, a physical "Satan," I also don't believe that during these 40 days in the wilderness Jesus was physically taken to the top of the temple or the mountain top. These are metaphors for some very real temptations. I always tell people not to take numbers in the Bible literally. I don't know if Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, or thirty-five days, or eighty days. But forty days. . . Noah was in the Ark forty days; Moses was on the Mountain forty days. In ancient times, the number forty simply meant a very long time.

So Jesus was in the wilderness a long time with the forces of evil, the "dark side," tempting him. Let's look at the temptations, and Jesus' response to them. There are three temptations. (Three is also a very biblical number.)

The first temptation, we're told that Jesus was famished after fasting in the wilderness, and Satan told him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Now, one commentator I read asked, "Even if Jesus was famished, how many loaves of bread did he really need."¹ There are a lot of stones in the Galilean wilderness, and that commentator suggests that, by using the plural, Satan's temptation is not just that Jesus can have something to eat, but that Jesus can feed the world; and wouldn't that be tempting. Friends, if someone told me, "Say the word, and we'll feed the world," how could I say "No." But what if I had to deny the presence, the power and the glory of God, in order to do it? It's still real tempting, but what does Jesus say, "We don't live by bread alone, but by the word of almighty God." It's a quote from Deuteronomy.

The second temptation is a play on Jesus ego. Actually it started in the first temptation. Both the first and second temptation start with "If you are the Son of God. . ." Now Satan knows full well that Jesus is the Son of God. . . But the temptation – "If you're so good, prove it." Throw yourself off the temple, and let the angels catch you. Temptation. . . How often do we try to prove how good we are, try to prove how worthy we are. How often do we compare ourselves to others. But Jesus would have none of that. He again quotes Deuteronomy: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."

And the last temptation: "Worship me, and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world." Wow – tempting - the temptation of power; the temptation of fame; the temptation of wealth – all rolled into one. But on Ash Wednesday we heard that famous scripture – "Don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but treasures in heaven; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Jesus said it when he stood before Pilate – "My kingdom is not of this world." And so, again he quotes Deuteronomy as he responds: "Away with you Satan, for it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Three temptations: Food for the world; a major ego boost; and power/fame/fortune; and Jesus stood up to all three, and said, "No. . . no that's not who I am." And so I ask once again, "What are your temptations?" Maybe you share some of the above.

I note there is nothing wrong with attempting to feed the world, in fact I hope we will work toward the feeding of the world. I'm told we have enough food to feed the world. We simply need to get the food to where it's needed. Yes I want to feed the world; but there is something wrong, there is something evil, if we're forced to feed people's bodies to the exclusion of their souls. One of the tag lines for this church is "Feeding the Community, Body and Soul." I hope we will

¹ M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VII, p. 164

continue in our efforts to provide food to those who need it; but I pray we will never forget to feed people's souls.

Then I ask, how many of us are very protective of our egos. Those "you're not good enough" evil spirits are working in our minds; we'll jump at any chance to prove them wrong; and we have the need to prove them wrong over, and over, and over again. I am fond of a 1927 writing called the *Desiderata*; I think it contains a lot of wisdom. Maybe I'm showing my age. When I was in college in the early seventies, a best selling record was made based on the *Desiderata*. But one of my favorite lines says, "Do not compare yourself to others. If you do, you will be both vain and vile, for there will always be greater and lesser persons than yourself." Still, the temptation is to compare, in an attempt to either build or defend the ego.

There there's the power/fame/fortune temptation. This is a broad one; and in some way, it probably applies to most of our temptations. Things, toys, oh how we love our toys. Oh, how we want to feel important. Maybe that will give us the ego boost we're looking for.

Friends, there's a reason that the temptation story is the first Sunday of Lent. It's because Lent is the time for us, you and me, to deal with our temptations. Lent is the time for us, you and me, to say, "Away with you, Satan, I'm putting God first. I'm looking for ways to serve God." There is no better time than Lent to prayerfully consider our temptations, and put them behind us; not just until Easter, but permanently put them behind us. Some may need some help with that, and that help might come from a spouse, or a friend, or your pastor, or even a licensed counselor.

We are all tempted. Temptation is a natural part of being human. But this Lent, let us put our temptations behind us and look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,
Be present with us not only in Lent,
but everyday of our lives.
Help us put temptation behind us,
that we may serve you with love and joy and peace.
Amen.

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