

## Sermon ✝ February 26, 2023

Matthew 4:1-11

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This morning we look at the story of Jesus as he was tested in the wilderness.

There are many kinds of wildernesses, and it's possible that you've never been in a wilderness such as the one in the temptation story of Jesus. It was not a wilderness of trees or a desert of sand.

The word "*desert*" the Scripture refers to is a barren place, a place that is desolate, a place of only rocks and howling wind, a place where you take in a mouthful of dust every time you try to breathe.

A wilderness meant something more to Israel, however, than just a barren place. "*Wilderness*" signified not only emptiness, but also testing.

Just as Israel was tempted in the wilderness after its affirmation by God at the crossing of the Red Sea, so Jesus was tempted in the wilderness after the affirmation of God at his baptism. Even as Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and Moses and Elijah were in the wilderness for forty days, so Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days.

And the question came to Jesus, as it came to Israel: Which way will you go, Jesus? Will you go the way of God? Or will you wander in circles like Israel?

There in that wilderness, in his hunger, with the shimmering sun glancing off the round, smooth stones that must have looked like loaves of bread, suddenly there was Satan.

In this story it's very important that we not become so preoccupied with the figure of Satan that we miss the message of the temptation. No visual representation of Satan is given to us here. We are only told those subtly insistent words that come to Jesus.

And in those words, whatever manifestation or whatever consciousness Jesus experienced in that moment, there was the overwhelming temptation to turn from the course he had set for himself and to begin to pursue his own, real hungers.

And what is intended to be conveyed to us by these images is the ultimate question of the destiny of us all. What is the meaning of life, according to this person Jesus? And would the needs of Jesus—when they became sharp enough as they do eventually for all of us—lead him to do the wrong thing, or even to do the right thing but in the wrong way?

It is no accident that the first temptation concerns bread. Life, reduced to its simplest elements, is always a struggle for bread. Our hungers lead us day by day and step by step in more subtle ways than we understand.

It's easy enough to see hunger and bread as the basic struggle for life in places like North Africa or India, or in the alleyways and seemingly invisible places that millions of homeless Americans call *home*.

In other settings—like ours—sometimes it's hard to see how our hungers control us. But if life gets difficult enough, we see it. And we humans must make choices.

We have to deal with the same temptation that faced Jesus, for the words of the Tempter strike not only at Jesus' basic needs, but also at ours.

The question is, how much is bread worth? What will we do to get it? Not just the kind of bread you got in the school lunch room at noon, but all the kinds of bread we go after in this world.

Bread represents all of our needs—money and jobs and friendships and security. These are the hungers of life.

And so it was, that Jesus was tempted by Satan. *Do you see these stones in this parched and barren wilderness? Then turn them into bread. And humankind will run after you like a flock—grateful and obedient.*

But Jesus' reply to the Tempter was plain: *"We do not live by bread alone, but by every word from the mouth of God."*

The secret of human existence is not only to live but to have something to live for. It is toward the very end of Matthew's gospel, when they ask Jesus, *"Lord, when did we ever see anybody hungry, much less you? When did we ever know that anybody ever needed anything, much less you?"*

And we remember well his answer, *"Because you did it not to the least of these, my brothers and my sisters, you did not do it unto me."*

When Jesus knew hunger in the wilderness, he knew all hungers in all wildernesses.

He knows the pain of starvation in North Africa.

He knows the brutalization of humankind in Central America and Ukraine.

He knows the humiliation of the ghettos in the United States.

He knows the pain and the anguish of sterile hospital wards and of bleak mental asylums.

He knows the anguish of parents who watch children kidnaped as political prisoners.

He knows the shame of racism and the hatred of prejudice.

We must be very careful if we do not think that Satan sits upon our shoulders. If we do not think that at our heels there is even now the Destroyer. If we do not think that where we now stand also reflects the danger of worldly bread versus godly freedom, we do not know what this world is all about.

Jesus said, *"We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* That is, by the truth of God, by the presence of the living God— beyond selfishness, beyond nationalism, by our choice of the way of God and the Christ of God.

That word alone liberates, leads, lasts. Without it, we face a grubbing, miserly existence—faithless, hopeless, lifeless. Without it, we know only the satisfaction of the stomach, never the satisfaction of the spirit and soul.

And what is it that the word of God provides?

For loneliness: presence;

For neglect: caring;

For indifference: understanding;

For guilt: forgiveness.

These are the words of life.

Jesus said, *“I am the bread of life,”*

Jesus said, *“The one who comes to me shall never hunger, the one who believes in me shall never thirst.”*

And Jesus took bread and broke it and said, *“This is my body, broken for you.”*

Only God is sufficient for our hungers—only God can satisfy the hungers of life.