

OPENING SENTENCE: Tested by the devil in the wilderness, Jesus said; “You shall worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.

Sermon: “That’s Tempting”

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

PRAYER of ILLUMINATION: Gracious God, our way in the wilderness, guide us, by your word, through these forty days, and minister to us with your Holy Spirit, that we may be reformed, restored, and renewed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Then the devil took him to the Holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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.” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Immediately after Jesus’ baptism (3:13-17), with the disclosure of Jesus’ identity and the quality of his relationship with the Father, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus the beloved Son out into the wilderness to be severely tested. Clearly, easy living is not part of his sonship. Indeed, closeness to God involves conflict and struggle that will lay bare one’s deepest passion and loyalty. Central to each of the challenges that Jesus faces is a single question: To what extent will he trust God to be God and so be himself.

While many view the wilderness as a place for recreation and renewal, wilderness in the Bible is nearly always a place of struggle. Remarkably, Jesus follows the leading Spirit into the wilderness solitude “to be tempted by the devil.” Indeed, Jesus will later teach his disciples to pray that God not lead them into temptation (6:13), but that does not mean God should spare them from all testing.

The temptation Jesus faces in the wilderness comes after fasting “forty days and forty nights”, a specification that resonates in the Jewish community. The rain of the great flood fell upon the earth for forty days and forty nights while Noah and his family waited for their deliverance from evil and rain. Moses fasted alone in the presence of the Lord for forty days and forty nights atop Mt. Sinai as he wrote the Ten Commandments. Elijah followed the Lord’s urgings and fasted for forty days and forty nights as he fled to Mt. Horeb, where he encountered God. The number forty, as in years, is further rooted in Israel’s struggle to practice faithfulness in the wilderness, day and night. Now Jesus has endured forty days and nights of fasting and solitude in the wilderness and arrives at a critical junction where his loyalty to God the Father is tested through his confrontation with the “Tester”, who is also called the “devil.”

In the first confrontation, the “Tester” encourages Jesus to satisfy his physical hunger by turning stones into bread. The Devil’s conditional statement does not reflect doubt about Jesus’ identity or power. “Since you are the Son of God”.

Nevertheless, the deceiver attempts to mislead Jesus into using his power for himself rather than trusting the Father to satisfy his need. Jesus sees through the deception clearly – just as he sees through a deceitful “Kiss” in the Garden – and he refuses. Citing scripture, Jesus insists that there is more at stake at the moment than food, as essential as food is. Jesus will not misuse his power for personal material gain. The second test focuses on Jesus’ vulnerability and need for safety. The devil invites Jesus to make himself secure from injury or even death. Moreover, he quotes scripture to prove that God agrees. Jesus is not deceived. The devil is using Scripture out of context; it does not endorse testing God’s protective grace

for the sake of self-assurance. Thus, Jesus rebuts the devil with a text of his own and applies it faithfully in its context. Jesus is, after all, God's son and full of the Holy Spirit. Jesus will not misuse his power to make himself safe and secure.

The third temptation attempts to seduce Jesus with domination and prestige. The devil offers Jesus control over all of the world's kingdoms, along with their praise and glory, in exchange for his allegiance. Jesus is not lead astray.

He rejects the deceiver's misdirection and quotes scripture again in its context, saying, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Jesus will not misuse his power to amass clout and esteem.

At this, Satan departs, and divine messengers arrive to serve Jesus' needs. He has come through each temptation through total reliance on God the Father. Jesus is God's Son, with whom God is well pleased. Clearly, temptation is to be avoided at all costs. It is inevitable for God's children. Indeed, temptations of materialism, security, and prestige are not foreign to us. Whatever form temptation may take, it may be passed through by means of trust in God to provide what is needed. The "Tester's power is real, but it is limited. Like Jesus, believers can trust in God's Word and the saving power. Victory belongs to those who will follow Jesus through temptation.

The Tempter's final attempt to capture the soul of Jesus takes the form of a taunt shouted at Jesus as he hung "despised and rejected" on the cross of Golgotha, a taunt voiced by those who passed by – shaking their heads: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross".

The Tempter is still whispering his enticing suggestions to Christian people today.

There is something captivating about seeing evil incarnate on the "Big Screen", in pages of a novel, or in the names of those said by a nation to pose political threats. It is only human to feel the need to see evil anthropomorphized, to name, visualize, vilify, and separate us from "it" in order to engage "it" as an opponent in battle. This is true in sacred text as well. Evil test Eve, and Aaron, the great high priest, Job and King David, Jesus and his disciples. Over and over again, in order to live a life that chooses God, a faithful person must face the choice of acting outside of God. It is easier to make the choice if we can put a face on temptation.

At first glance, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness seems out of place, even heretical. It is almost gratuitous that Jesus is tempted, as we know he will not submit. Much like the inevitability of the cross, the defeat of the devil in his encounter with Jesus is inevitable. Jesus will overcome; yet this scene stands in a central place in Matthew between baptism and ministry, naming the reality of evil in the face of holiness.

Jesus is tempted by bread for his hunger. He is tempted to save himself from danger. Finally, he is tempted to take all the power in the world that the devil can offer. Each time he rejects temptation, he sets up for the reader a way to understand the cross to come. Certainly, God can save God's self from death on the cross, and certainly God in Jesus can refuse temptation to sin, but in our humanity we need to see God offer sacrifice and refuse temptation in order to learn the lesson ourselves.

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY:

In C.S. Lewis's "The Screwtape Letters", Lewis writes of a junior tempter-in-training named Wormwood and his mentor Uncle Screwtape. Young Wormwood's task is to darken the heart of his "Patient", to train him to love things worldly and reject God, so that Wormwood may finally escort him into what we can only imagine to be hell. The young apprentice is to keep his patient navel-gazing and self-involved, clueless about who he is.

Keep him spiritual and not practical, Screwtape advises, as it is the practical that often brings people to God.

Allow the patient to be oversensitive until everything, even his mother, grates on his nerves. Keep his prayers formless, as they are easier to manipulate. Turn his gaze away from God and towards himself. Create a subtle conflict when he prays for courage; let him find himself turning boastful. In the final letter, the patient dies and goes to heaven, leaving Wormwood a failure and Screwtape in a spiral of anger. The captivating part of the story is not that Screwtape and Wormwood are trying to create an army of ruthless killers, because they are not; rather they are trying to create a generation of people who are defined by selfishness and insincerity, pettiness, and pride, fear, and a need to control the things of this world.

This is true of our own temptations. Most of us cannot imagine the devil offering bread after a forty-day fast. We do not know the fear of being held over the ledge at the top of the Empire State Building. We certainly do not know the temptation of being offered all the power in the world. Each one of us, however, understand the temptations Screwtape and Wormwood offer, pride, vanity, selfishness, and apathy.

These are just as dark as Jesus' temptations, and perhaps even more so, because most of the time, they do not come with a face.

Temptations come to us in moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough. Temptation comes in judgements we make about strangers or friends who make choices we do not understand. Temptation rules us, making us able to look away from those in need and to live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger, and disease. Temptation rages in moments when we allow our temper to define our lives or when addiction to wealth, power, influence over others, vanity, or inordinate need for control defines who we are. Temptation wins when we engage in the justification of little lies, small sins, a racist joke, a questionable business practice for the greater good, a criticism of a spouse when he or she is not around. Temptation wins when we get caught up in the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself. These are the faceless moments of evil that, while mundane, lurk in the recesses of our lives and our souls.

PRAYER:

Almighty God, your Son fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are but did not sin. Give us Grace to direct our lives in obedience to your spirit, that as you know our weakness, so we may know your power to save; through Jesus Christ our redeemer, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

Lenten penitence engages the dark places in our lives that we may come face to face with them, name them, understand them, and seek forgiveness for them. It is not about guilt. It is about freedom from the control that our fears and insecurities have over us all, about the amendment of life and new beginnings. May the Spirit of the triune God strengthen and sustain you all throughout these forty days and into the life that is to come. GO IN PEACE proclaiming the message of reconciliation God has entrusted in us. Thanks be to God.

PRAYER of ADORATION: We give you thanks God our Father, for mercy that reaches out, for patience that waits our return, for love that is always ready to welcome us and bring us home. You are faithful, and you are kind. Today we join together with each other, to declare your praise and to worship you, and you alone. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.