

Sermon for March 1, 2020 – “Temptations”

Temptation of Our Lord, Year A – Texts: Psalm 51, Matthew 4:1-11

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You might recall that a little over a month ago we talked about Jesus’ baptism. We talked about it being the inauguration of His ministry. The moment in Jesus’ life where He’s identified as the Son of God. Empowered by the Spirit. Loved by the Father. We talked in particular about identification. That in His baptism Jesus identifies with us so that we might identify with Him. I said that this particular aspect was the most meaningful and the most personal. So much so that I want to look at Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness through that same lens. The lens of identification. It’s because in His temptations, Jesus experiences in a very intense way the predicament of the human condition. Simply put, the temptations of Jesus are also *our* temptations.

Haven’t we all been tempted? Of course we have! How well have we resisted? Probably not too well. How often have we given in? Probably far too often. Playwright Oscar Wilde once said, “**I can resist anything but temptation.**” Matthew provides us with three temptations; temptations that all of us face. But, in Jesus’ case they go beyond the merely physical. There’s a sense in which *all* spiritual quests involve testing and temptation. On the spiritual journey the pilgrim, the traveler, is driven to strange, dark and mystical places. Think of King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table and their search for the Holy Grail. Frodo’s journey in the Lord of the Rings. Luke Skywalker in Star Wars. The confrontations that occur are less between the hero and some villain or evil force than they are about something *within* themselves. What’s most often confronted are their own fears, their fantasies and their frustrations. These are what Jesus confronts in our gospel reading. These are what I want to talk about this morning.

When we begin to talk about fear we must acknowledge that we all have fear, even the strong have fears. We cannot escape this. But we mustn’t see this as a weakness. In fact, strength is often built upon fear. But, paradoxically it is in our strength that we can be most vulnerable to fear. We see this in Jesus’ first temptation. It’s an appeal not to His **weakness** but to His **strength**, His identity as God’s Son. Having not eaten for forty days Jesus is undoubtedly hungry. As the Son of God, God incarnate, Jesus surely has the strength, the power, indeed the superhuman power to overcome His hunger. So the tempter provokes Jesus, “**If you are the Son of God command these stones to become loaves of bread.**” Think about that for a moment. Most of us could not imagine the degree of this temptation. I have a hard enough time imagining not eating for more than a few hours let alone forty days. Anyone ever fast? I tried it once, managed about four days. Seriously. That’s it! Forty days – no way!

The first temptation is a poignant reminder that we’re not really very strong after all. It can take so very little to remind us. All it takes is one tragic accident or a seemingly harmless temptation; the loss of job, the death of a loved one, really, **any** kind of loss for us to realize just how vulnerable we all are. Would any of us do what Jesus did in the wilderness? Would we? Could we? What are our greatest fears? Being alone? Loneliness? Poverty? Illness? Death?

What kind of strength exactly is Jesus demonstrating here? It is the strength in knowing who He is and why He has come. An identity grounded in an **absolute** faith in God. Jesus rebukes the temptation with the truth He knows in the deepest recesses of His being, “**One does not live by bread alone.**” Of course, Matthew’s account, different from Luke’s, adds the rest of the verse from Deuteronomy to Jesus’ reply. For many it has become axiomatic, almost cliché, and so we understand that “**One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.**”

We come to learn from this then in times of fear that our own strength can desert us, but that God will not. Jesus understood this and in resisting the first temptation reminds us that **our** true strength is found in God. In much the same way as we move on to talking about the second condition; fantasies. We recognize here that one of the most dangerous is the temptation of power.

In Jesus' second temptation of Jesus the devil entices Jesus to substitute His spiritual power for personal power and gain. Jesus is given a view of all the kingdoms of the world. The devil proclaims, "All these I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." Is it just me or does anyone else think that it's interesting that the devil thinks that the kingdoms of the world are actually his to give? But that's the trap here. There's a constant seduction to imagine that we have any sort of real power. The temptation is to believe too much in ourselves in our own ability or power to obtain grace, salvation, you name it, rather than trusting in God's power. We have this fantasy that everything we have is ours and that what we have achieved has been through our own will, efforts and abilities. But it's just that...a fantasy. Faith calls us to participate – yes but not to try to control or dominate or to delude ourselves by thinking that any part of what we have is actually ours. Jesus resists the temptation of personal power. Instead, in humility, He acknowledges that all power belongs to God. He answers the tempter, "**Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.**" In His second letter to the Corinthians Paul teaches us that God's grace is sufficient for us, that power – ours and God's – is made perfect in weakness. This is one of the great paradoxes of our faith. What it means is that power and authority are transformative and liberating when we use them with great humility, when we recognize our limitations and fallibility and remember that ultimately all power and authority, all glory and honor belongs to God. Jesus the best example of this. Most certainly it is demonstrated here in His confrontation in the wilderness, but never more so than **on the cross**.

The third condition, frustration, are among the worst experiences for anyone who takes their faith seriously. The reason is, sad to say, we live in an era of instant gratification. As a society, we are obsessed with the immediate. All the technology at our disposal, email and the Internet has intensified our quest for the quick fix. We expect to have our needs and desires met 'yesterday.' Yet we constantly find our expectations frustrated. All too often all that the world promises us with all its bright lights, bells and whistles aren't delivered. Much of life, what we see in ads in various media, is so tempting. And as most of us know all too well no one is immune to temptation. Adam and Eve certainly weren't. God had told them that to eat of the fruit would bring death, but the serpent told them otherwise. Think about it for a moment. Surrounded by paradise, able to walk and talk with God and know God on an intimate basis when tempted with knowledge that could very well have meant their death, they chose knowledge. They gave in to their temptation and risked death. They were not immune, and neither was Jesus immune.

The tempter whisks Jesus away to Jerusalem and places Him on the pinnacle of the Temple. There, he tempts Jesus to throw Himself off, to risk death. Similar to the way that Adam and Eve were told that they would not die. Likewise, the devil quoting the psalms, specifically Psalm 91:11-2, tells Jesus that surely the Son of God will be protected. But unlike Adam and Eve Jesus resists this temptation and Himself using the words of scripture declares to Satan, "Do not put the Lord Your God to the test."

When all three temptations are over Jesus says to the devil, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.'" It's important to note that all three temptations contain the element of irony of the quick fix. There seems to be no end to the various 'gurus' and charlatans, the Eckhart Tolles, the Tony Robbins', the various 'prosperity gospel' preachers; the Joel Osteens, the Paula White-Cains, that can be found on the pinnacles of their temples promoting their magical wonder cures to whatever might be ailing us often – not coincidentally – quoting scripture.

Like the tempter in today's gospel reading they too trade on our fears, fantasies and frustrations. It's so very tempting to not want to do the hard work that's often required of us. We embrace the quick fix or worse – leave it to others. But most do not see how deadly these are.

The late pastor and author Eugene Peterson in his book *A Long Obedience In The Same Direction* (which I highly recommend!) wrote that “We fail to realize how harmful it is to assume that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. Where faith is concerned too many people have developed the lifestyle of a tourist and only want the high points. There is no desire to wait patiently and devoutly for a true relationship with God. An essential thing in heaven and earth is that there would be a long obedience in the same direction resulting in something that makes life worth living.”

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing; Jesus resists His tempter and the life of riches, ease and comfort that He's offered and goes about the hard work of salvation. He embraces a life of suffering that would ultimately find its culmination on Calvary. He embraces the long obedience in the same direction. In His baptism Jesus' identification with humankind was made complete. In resisting temptation He accepts the experience trusting God without needing to test God. Learning to live within human limitations with fears and frustrations but also with faith and trust in God is to embrace the journey and the experience of being human. In doing so we follow the example of Jesus Christ, fully human and fully God. In resisting temptation we make room for God to truly heal, restore, and save. Living this way is allowing God to be God. Living this way is to experience God as miraculous, liberating, and eternal. Living this way is to find ourselves and become ourselves. Jesus went into the wilderness to find out what it meant to be Jesus. The temptations were real. The tempter was real. All too real. But, in a sense they helped Jesus to understand Himself, who He was and what He was. Fully human and fully God. They helped Him see the inherent possibilities there. And so Jesus had to make some important choices. So do we. Unfortunately, some choices are bad ones.

I find it ironic that we pray “...and lead us not into temptation...” when our own bad choices are usually what lead us into temptation. And it's for that reason that tempter will always try to get us, to choose to die for the things that we would live for. But we must learn to choose to live for the things we would die for, that which is truly valuable. Jesus, in making the right choices, in resisting temptation has shown us how.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.