

Wilderness Temptations

Matthew 4:1-11

1st Sunday in Lent

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Gospel Reading

On this First Sunday in Lent, we step back in Matthew's story, to immediately following the baptism of Jesus. Jesus is baptized by John, in the River Jordan. As he steps out of the water, the heavens are opened to him, he saw the Spirit of God descend on him like a dove, and a voice from heaven said: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Our reading for today picks up the action with this story of Jesus in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan. Listen to our reading from Matthew, chapter 4, verses 1 through 11:

^{4:1} Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ 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.'"

⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Each year, we hear this text on the First Sunday in Lent. Each year, Jesus goes out into the wilderness, where he fasts for forty days, and is tested by the devil. The most obvious connection with Lent is the period of forty days, since Lent is the forty days leading up to Easter. But, is there any more for us to learn from this story?

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 4, verse 15 says: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."

Jesus is our high priest. In the Jewish religion, the priest was the one who performed sacrifices on behalf of the people. The priest was the one who took the sins of the people to God and sought forgiveness for the people. As Christians, Jesus is the one who takes our sins to God and pleads our case to the one who judges all. Jesus Christ is our representative before God. And Hebrews tells us that our high priest knows our weaknesses, having been tempted as we are, yet without sin. But was Jesus really tempted in the same ways as you and me? Do we believe that Jesus can sympathize with our weaknesses?

Three times Jesus was tested. First, after fasting for forty days and nights, the devil suggested that Jesus turn stones into bread. Second, the devil suggested that Jesus throw himself off the temple to show that God would send angels to save him. And, third the devil offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, if Jesus would just bow down and worship him. All three of these "tests" seem unique to Jesus. At first glance, none of these seem relevant to us.

Each time, Jesus answered the devil by quoting scripture; each quote coming from Deuteronomy. While these quotes may have had more meaning for Matthew's original audience, we can learn from looking at the texts that Jesus quoted. The quotes, from Deuteronomy chapters 6 and 8, are linked to events that happened when Israel was in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt. If we look at those situations, we can see how these three temptations of Jesus, may relate to us.

When Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread, he rebuked the devil saying, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" This quote, from Deuteronomy chapter 8, relates back to when the people were in the wilderness and complained to Moses: "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." In answer

to the people's complaining, God sent the Manna that would sustain them in the wilderness. The people focused solely on their need for food, their perceived hunger, and in turn were blinded to the Lord's providence and promise to lead them and provide for them in the wilderness. We too can be blinded by our own "hungers." Our desires for worldly possessions, and seek to feed on worldly nourishment, when we should rely on God's providence for the important things that we need; namely "every word that comes from the mouth of God," meaning not just scripture, but Jesus Christ the Living Word, and all the guidance and good gifts that we receive from God.

In the second test, Jesus is taken to the top of the temple and encouraged to throw himself off, because, and this time the devil quotes his own scripture: "[God] 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 replies: "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" This quote, from Deuteronomy, harkens back to a time when the people again found life in the wilderness wanting, this time for water. Again, they complained to Moses: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" A second time, God answers the people. This time by providing water from a stone. In the end Moses proclaims that the people, "...tested the Lord saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" The people put God to the test, wondering if God was with them. Do we not, when we are faced with difficulty or hardship, wonder if God is with us? Do we not, instead of relying on the promises of scripture and the assurances of the Son, seek ways to test that God is with us, that God is in our hearts and in our community? Do we not, put God to the test when we rely more on our own strength, instead of the faithful promises of God?

In the third temptation, Jesus is taken up to a high mountain and promised all the kingdoms of the world. The catch this time is that Jesus would need to bow down and worship the devil, and Jesus responded: "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" This quote is in reference to Exodus, chapter 32. When Moses went up the mountain to receive the Law. When the people grew restless, they convinced Aaron to make them gods to worship. We may not worship idols of gold, but do we not worship false gods of commercialism, celebrity, and technology? Anything that holds a place of importance in our lives that can draw us away from God, away from the church, can be the "other god" we worship. "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only," says Jesus.

We may not be tempted in the same specific ways that Jesus was tested, but we can, and often do, fall prey to similar trials.

In our reading from Romans, Paul says, "...by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Through the obedience of Jesus. The obedience that allowed him to turn away the devil and his tests, and the obedience that led him to the cross, we are made righteous. Our salvation, our righteousness, is earned through the blood and the resurrection of God's Son.

Hebrews chapter 4 says: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

On this first Sunday of Lent, we hear that Jesus was tempted as we are, yet did not Sin. Because of that, because of his sinlessness, we can make the journey to the cross with boldness knowing that we may receive mercy and grace to help in our time of need. Let us journey together through Lent, knowing that we can be tempted and that our Lord was indeed tempted, that our Savior knows our weaknesses, and stands as our high priest mediating on our behalf before the One God who judges all; the God of grace and glory.

Let us pray:

Mighty God, we walk this life tempted in so many ways. We encounter troubles that give us doubt, and times when we can be doubtful of your presence. We look to other things to fill our lives, knowing that they can draw us away from you. Send us your Holy Spirit to bring us back to you. As you sent the Son to show us the way and free us from the sin that clings so closely, give us strength to journey with him through Lent, and through our lives, until we can stand before you cleansed of every sin, and free from the temptations of this world.

AMEN.