

Facing Our Temptations

Matthew 4:1-11

Introduction

On Ash Wednesday we began *The Journey*, a phrase that describes both our Lenten theme as well as the spiritual journey that each follower of Jesus Christ needs to make as they mature in their faith and become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. We follow Jesus on *The Journey*.

We are inspired by these words from Luke's Gospel:

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51)

We see in those words that Jesus was intentionally moving forward to what He knew would be His death on the cross and His resurrection on Easter Sunday. Our destination on Wednesday was a place where we were challenged to evaluate the motives behind the way in which we practice our acts of righteousness (our good deeds). Jesus issued this challenge to a large group of listeners gathered on a Galilean mountainside as a part of His Sermon on the Mount.

Today we follow Jesus to another mountain. The crowd is significantly smaller in today's text. The only people present are Jesus and His tormentor, the devil. The events described in this passage occur immediately following His baptism.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. (Matthew 4:1)

We might well find ourselves confused a bit at this point. We might ask: "How is the temptation of Jesus a part of my journey? I'm not the Son of God. I don't face those kinds of temptations." But I encourage you to remember what the writer of the book of Hebrews taught his readers:

We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

The temptations of Jesus are the same temptations we face. Perhaps not as dramatically, but we face them nonetheless. So if we choose to follow Jesus, there are two realities we must know.

REALITY #1: WE WILL BE TEMPTED BY THE DEVIL.

- The devil does not want us to follow Jesus.
- He does not want us to grow in our faith.
- He wants to destroy our testimony, lest others see our lights shining and come to Jesus because of our faith.

- He is relentless in his pursuit of us.

The Scriptures faithfully warn us of this reality. One such warning is found in 1st Peter:

Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

REALITY #2: WE MUST LEARN HOW TO DEAL WITH THOSE TEMPTATIONS.

- It is not the design of God that those who follow Jesus automatically fall victim to the devil's temptations every time one is offered.
- We are called to resist the devil. That passage in 1 Peter continues with these words:

Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. (1 Peter 5:9)

And so on this day *The Journey* brings us to a destination where we are called upon to face our temptations and to deal with them as Jesus dealt with the ones He faced. These temptations essentially fall into one of three types.

TEMPTATION #1: TO PROVIDE FOR MY PERSONAL COMFORT

Let me call your attention once again to these words:

After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." (Matthew 4:2-3)

Following His baptism, Jesus went on a 40 day fast. That is not unusual. People of God often engage in periods of fasting as they prepare themselves for some particular ministry venture. But a 40 day fast is a long one. I know people who have fasted for that long, but I've never tried it myself. I commend fasting to you as a spiritual discipline, and encourage you to consider a fast at some point in your spiritual journey. Start small though – a meal or two.

I love how the Gospel writer phrases this:

After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. (Matthew 4:2)

That's an understatement! Of course He was hungry. He was very ready to have what the devil was offering: something to eat. Tell the stones to become bread.

I love bread. It doesn't take 40 days for me to be hungry for bread. Fresh from the oven. Melting butter. Mmmm... Just preaching about it makes my mouth water. It's wired into my genetic code. My last name is German, and is loosely translated as "Bread Baker."

But this temptation offered by the devil isn't just a temptation to eat. It is the temptation to get everything you need to make yourself feel comfortable.

- If you are hungry, it might well be food.
- If you are thirsty, it might be something to drink. (If you are an alcoholic, that drink might be a bit stronger than it would be for someone else.)
- If you are easily embarrassed, it might be space of anonymity.
- If you are under stress, it might be a person on whom you can vent.
- If you are insecure, it might be an affirmation.

In those moments when we realize there is something we need, something we don't have, the devil comes to us and says:

"I know what you need, and I can help you get it. All you need to do is to doubt what God has said."

If you fail to connect this story to the story of the baptism of Jesus at the end of Matthew 3, you miss this key point. Remember it? As Jesus was coming up out of the water, He heard His Father's voice booming from the sky:

"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

As the Son of God, Jesus had access to all of the resources of heaven. He needed nothing. But that's the point where the devil tempted.

"If you are the Son of God ..." (Matthew 4:3)

Do you really believe that Jesus? It's the same the devil tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden:

"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Genesis 3:1)

And the devil will tempt you in the very same way. In your moment of need, the devil will come alongside you and whisper into your ear: "Do you really believe that God will:

- Provide for you?"
- Protect you?"
- Give you your daily bread?"
- Then why hasn't He done it yet? Maybe you need to take matters into your own hands. Maybe you should try it my way.

TEMPTATION #2: TO PRESSURE GOD INTO ACTION

The devil uses the same strategy in his second temptation:

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is

written: ““He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”” (Matthew 4:5-6)

When Abraham was waiting for the child that would make him a “father of many nations,” he and his wife got a bit impatient. God wasn't moving quickly enough in their way of thinking. So they took matters into their own hands, and got themselves and all of their eventual descendants into a lot of trouble. You can read this story in Genesis 16.

- Peter tried to spur Jesus into action when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

It didn't work in either of those instances, and it doesn't work now. Which is why the devil tempts us in this way.

TEMPTATION #3: TO WORSHIP SOMETHING ELSE

The devil tried one more time:

Again, the devil took (Jesus) to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” (Matthew 4:8-9)

The truth is that if Jesus stuck to God's plan, He would receive exactly what Satan was promising. But God's way involved death on a cross. The devil offered the same outcome but with a shortcut – a pain-free way of getting it all.

A focus on achieving all the things the devil offers results in worshipping someone, something other than God. The theological phrase for that is “idolatry.” If my focus is on things, those things become my god. Anything can become god to me.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Mark 8:34-37)

APPLICATION

In each instance, the temptation of Jesus came in the form of a challenge to His understanding of God's Word for His life. “If you are the Son of God, if really are who God says you are ...” The resistance to those temptations came as Jesus relied on God's Word. “It is written:

- Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. (Deuteronomy 8:3)
- Do not put the Lord your God to the test. (Deuteronomy 6:16)
- Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only. (Deuteronomy 6:13)

The Journey for each follower of Jesus requires that we face our temptations and learn to rely on the truth of God's Word for the situations we face.

Amen.