

Only One Way

Matthew 4:1-11

Introduction

When our kids were in elementary school, they participated in a wonderful program known as Destination Imagination. It would later be renamed to Odyssey of the Mind. Karen and I served as coaches, and with three kids over multiple years, we coached 21 different teams. A lot of work, but a lot of fun.

If you are not familiar with the program,

Here are some examples of the problems those young people have to solve. Option 1 reads:

OMers will become conductors and engineers as they design, build and operate a train vehicle. As the train travels the course it will have a new car attached at each stop. Along the route it will encounter different challenges that make the train travel in different ways. After all of its cargo is picked up, the items will be unloaded and assembled into a work of art. The performance will also include the use of ARM and HAMMER BAKING SODA, a humorous conductor character, and a villain character that tries to prevent the train from getting to its destination.

If you go to one of the competitions, you will see that there are a wide range of solutions that these teams use. Each team does something completely different! One problem, many solutions.

This Lenten season we are using the phrase "Thy Kingdom Come" as our theme. You no doubt recognize those three words as a portion of the second petition in the Lord's Prayer that you say during the communion portion of our worship service.

In our Ash Wednesday services this past week I introduced the theme by drawing a contrast between evidence of this world's kingdom and the Kingdom of Heaven. Where this world's kingdom reigns, we see war and violence, tension and hatred, division and unrest.

- Where the Kingdom of Heaven reigns, we see God at work. We see lives changed by the power of the Gospel. We find peace and hope, love and mercy.

A couple of weeks ago our Old Testament reading contained this very familiar verse:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

That's Kingdom of Heaven stuff. You won't find that anywhere in the kingdoms of this world.

There are any number of versions of the world's kingdom. They are as numerous as there are people, for we all have within us our own version of a kingdom.

- My kingdom is a place where I rule. I sit on the throne in my kingdom, and I get to do things my way in my kingdom.
- My way is different than your way. That's why earthly kingdoms can't get along.
- And that's a problem. A BIG problem.
- But the biggest problem is that my way, and your way, are not God's way.
- Remember Isaiah 55?

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. (Isaiah 55:8)

So here comes Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, urging us to pray like this:

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)

I would rather pray “My kingdom come. My will be done.” But that's not the teaching.

Part of our Lenten journey is to look deep within ourselves to find those places where what we really want – and what we really pray for – is OUR kingdom, not GOD'S kingdom.

- And then start to pray “THY KINGDOM COME.”

But it is an ongoing battle – one that even Jesus faced. Satan has no desire for God's kingdom to come. He will try to derail that however he can. Look how he tempted Jesus to abandon God's kingdom. It is the same strategy he uses with us.

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 seek your kingdom."

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 stop trying to do things His way and do it your 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

My hope and prayer this Lenten season is that we each develop a longing for God's kingdom—in us and in our world. Pray with me that His Kingdom DOES come; and that His will IS done on earth as it is in heaven.

Our memory verse for this Lenten season:

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:13-14)

Amen