

The Temptation of Jesus

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. 3 And 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, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"

7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! For it is written,

'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'" 11 Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.

This is the first Sunday of Lent, a time when we seek to deepen our faith by traveling with Jesus on his journey to the cross.

Our opening scene in this journey takes place immediately after Jesus is baptized. The Spirit has just swooped down and claimed him, and God's voice from heaven declares, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Now the spirit propels him into the wilderness for a time of testing, temptation, and discernment. At stake is nothing less than what the nature of his sonship is to be. Will he follow God's plan? Or will he depend on his own self-sufficiency?

Therein lies the root of all sins. That's how Adam and Eve were tempted in the garden: take this apple, and you will be like God, self-sufficient. No longer will you be dependent on God, the snake declares.

However, Jesus reminds us that we are created for dependence on more than ourselves. We are created by God to live in a relationship. God declared from the beginning that it is not good for us to live alone. We were created to live in relationship with God and one another. We were created to depend on God's faithfulness. And that is the test Jesus faces - will he depend on God's faithfulness?

So, Jesus is fasting as one of the earmarks of a faithful Jew in Jesus's time. He fasts, preparing for his mission as God's son. His hunger becomes a constant reminder of his call. Minute by minute, he feels the need for food. Hunger is his constant companion as he ponders the question, "Just what kind of son will I be? Will I depend on God, or will I be my own man?"

Matthew uses symbolic number 40 to describe the time of fasting in the wilderness. Here the number forty is supposed to remind us of the people of Israel in the wilderness for forty years. The people of Israel went through a time of discernment about what kind of people they wished to be. And even though they stumbled and faltered, God did not give up on them. Indeed, that is the story of Israel and the story of our lives. We keep stumbling and falling and God keeps lifting us up.

The time in the wilderness allowed them to be shaped and formed as the people of God and it does the same for Jesus.

For us, the same is true; there is a time of temptation, trials, and discernment that shapes and forms us as individuals and as churches. We know that testing comes to us all, but our response to it shapes our identity, and the choices we make determine whether we will live as children of God.

Symbolic or actual, in forty days, Jesus is stressed to his limits, which honestly is where we often find temptation coming to us. We are stressed, and then one more thing confronts us: we are tested. The shortcut, the harsh word, the destructive behavior, and the temptation to ignore our own morals and ethics are especially tempting when we are stressed to our limits. So, this time of stressful hunger makes Jesus susceptible to temptation, just like we are. As Hebrews 4:15 reminds us, he was tested like us in every way. And like us, temptation comes in the person of the devil.

The image of the devil is like the tester and accuser in the book of Job. You remember the story of Job. God is proud of Job, and the tester says, "Sure, he is faithful; he has everything. Take that away from Job and then see how faithful he is," the tester tells God.

Satan offers three tests for Jesus. We should note that what he offers Jesus are not bad things in and of themselves, food, notoriety, and power. But they are not God's path for Jesus.

Jesus is hungry, and the question is, "Will he sell his birthright like Esau did?" The tests of life not only come when we are stressed but often come into our areas of vulnerability. Remember, Esau came home starving, and his brother, Jacob, said, "Have some stew; all it will cost is your birthright." And Esau replies, "What good is my birthright if I starve to death?" Jesus, on the other hand, refuses to give up his birthright as Son of God to satisfy his hunger.

The tester says "Turn all these stones to bread, and you will have more than you need. Take care of yourself; provide for your needs," the tempter urges. "Think what people will think if you do that. People will flock to you. Think how many people you will be able to reach for God, and besides, what will it hurt?" Isn't that a deadly question? What will it hurt? "It's a victimless act?" No harm, no foul, the tester says. But Jesus knows better, and so do we. We know that a victimless act often misses the fact that we are the victim. To turn the stones into bread will cost Jesus his identity, not because having an abundance of bread is bad in and of itself, but it is just not God's path for Jesus. His path is to depend on the faithfulness of God. He came to feed others with the bread of life, not using his powers for himself.

Jesus rebuffs Satan, saying, "Life is more than bread, stuff, and things." We know that, even though it is sometimes doubtful, we remember it because of our consumerist culture. With its focus on by

how the wonderful product will make us feel and by the idea that we cannot be complete without a new, improved one to be happy.

Jesus reminds the tempter and us that he depends on God's faithfulness, not on his own self-sufficiency or self-aggrandizement. He feeds the 5000 with the same bread he refused to produce for himself. He was sent to serve others, not to be served, as he affirms that is what it means to be God's son.

Then Satan tries again "Since you are God's son, prove God's faithfulness. Prove it now; throw yourself down from here and God will send a legion of angels to catch you. What a spectacular act! Since God is faithful, what's the harm? A swan dives off the temple and an angelic rescue - what spectacle! He really would be a superstar then. That would really get people's attention. Think of the dramatic effect. Wow, the number of people he could reach for God! But Jesus refuses to put God to the test. This foreshadows Jesus on the cross. He reminds us that our security from danger is not what God promises, as the cross will later tell us. Remember the taunting and the testing from the people at the cross. "Come down if you are God's son. Come down from the cross. Come on down!" they jeer. But Jesus continues to define his sonship by his trust in God's faithfulness. And part of that sonship includes the cross, not its avoidance. He knows God promises to be with us through our trials. God does not spare us from them. He won't test God by diving off the temple, nor will he test God by coming down from the cross.

And finally, Jesus is offered power. As the tester says, "See all the nations. They can be yours if you will worship me." "Wow, just think of the people you can reach for God if you worship me. Just think of it, Jesus can rule the world if he will worship the tester and serve him." But Jesus refuses; he opts for the power of love not the love of power. To quote Jimi Hendrix:

"When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace." - Jimi Hendrix

Rather than take that tempting offer, he says, "The world will indeed be mine but not because of you but because my followers will live in the new kingdom God is creating. God will place the world in my hands. I will trust God. Besides, the world is not yours to give; it is God's."

So, Jesus was tempted and prevailed, but the tempter would return later, when Peter tries to prevent him from going to the cross, when people follow him because he gave them bread, and when he is suffering on the cross.

The tempter came to Jesus trying to convince him that there is a better way than God's way. And in like manner comes to us as well. His allure is: After all, it is the goal that counts, not how you get there. Great wealth is fine; God wants you to be wealthy. It doesn't matter how you get it. Lie, Cheat, and Steal as the old game used to declare. Jesus turns the tempter aside and reminds us, "Not only what we do is important, but just as important is how we do it."

Some of my favorite movies are Star Wars Films. In one part of the saga, Anakin Skywalker is tempted to give in to the dark side so he can save his beloved Padme from dying. All he has to do is follow the path the evil Emperor lays out for him. Follow the dark side and you will have the power even over death. He succumbs at the point of his vulnerability, his love for his wife.

However, his wife dies in childbirth. Temptation strikes him at the point of his greatest vulnerability.

I think it is appropriate to ask, “Where are our vulnerable spots and our insecurities? Where are we tempted to take a goal and use less than a noble path to get there? What is our weak point? Where does the tester come to us? Where is it we are vulnerable, susceptible to temptation, to selling our souls to ease our pain or soothe ourselves?” Let the model of Jesus be our guide, and the person of Jesus be our strength. We can resist and overcome the temptations. One of the most important steps in overcoming our temptation is to name it, own it, and remember that what we do and how we do it are really important. We cannot use just any means to accomplish an end because of who we are. We are people of the living God, and what we do and how we do it declares our identity.

So, what if we do succumb to temptation? Will we slip? Will the faithfulness of God that we depend on reach out to lift us up again? God will pick us up, dust us off, and help us start all over again. May God grant us a closer walk with Jesus this Lenten season and strengthen us to face our trials.

Amen