

Temptation
The United Church of Broomfield
February 26, 2022

Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSVue)

4 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.

TEMPTATION. In this Lenten season, we journey with Jesus through the wilderness; through darkness, isolation and pain which will end at the cross. The journey begins with the temptation. When we think of temptation, we generally think of things we have sworn off, and how many of them seem to be around us, tempting us to break our brand-new vows.

- Chocolate! That's all that's advertised on TV, isn't it? And everywhere you go, you can smell chocolate. It's tempting to give in, just for one candy bar.
- Alcohol. Suddenly, people you haven't seen for months are calling you up to invite you out for a beer. Of course, these perceptions are not really accurate. It's just that we become fixated on that which we cannot have – making it very difficult to stay away from temptation.
- Social media! A promise to not look at Facebook or TikTok. But then suddenly everyone is seeing great things on social media that you MUST see or telling you of pictures or events that are ONLY on social media apps. It's beyond frustrating.

But these are not really temptations at all – not ones of any great significance anyway.

We read that Jesus had gone forty days without food when the tempter came to Him. Have you ever fasted? I have once or twice and the longest I've gone is about 36 hours – that's it. It was so hard that I wondered if it's even possible to survive. Pretty pitiful.

- Two weeks ago (2/16) in Mozambique¹
 - Pastor Barajah – Santa Trindade Evangelical Church
 - 25 days – no food or water
 - Critical condition – so weak, couldn't move, talk.
 - Family sent to hospital, where he died, age 39,
 - Acute anemia, failure of digestive organs

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64659798>

Matthew tells us Jesus was famished. Duh! Of course, he was. Just being alive, he'd definitely be hungry and thirsty. And how about irritable, weak, hallucinating. I think speaking coherently in that condition would be miraculous.

So, Jesus is starving when the tempter appears and says, "if you're hungry, turn a rock into bread – that's a snap for the Son of God." **But this isn't about hunger and Jesus knows that.** It's about whether Jesus is going to trust God, or co-opt God's power and change the nature of a rock for his own purposes. So, Jesus resists temptation – still weak and hungry but trusting God.

Next, the tempter says, "Hey. If you want to really impress people – show them you really are a divine, legitimate, miracle worker - jump off the top of the temple. The angels will float you safely to the ground – if you are who you think you are." Jesus was tempted by this - to use his gifts, his God-given power to put on a show in order to make people believe that he was supernatural.

Satan quotes scripture to Jesus when he tempts him. I think about that – as a Christian and especially as a pastor – the tempter's knowledge of scripture. I often feel bad that I'm not a good scripture memorizer or that I can't quote scripture on command. There are people who know scripture so well and can recite it instantly – but I can't do that. I'm not that good and my mind doesn't work like that. It can be very harmful when others use scripture or knowledge of scripture as a weapon or as a way to make others feel "less than" about their faith and themselves as Christians. Quoting scripture does not a Christian make.

Anyway, Satan basically says, "I know God's Word too and in Psalm 91 it says the angels will guard you." **But this is about party tricks and Jesus knows that.** Jesus resists temptation by trusting God's real providence. Jesus says, "No. I don't think it's wise to put God to the test."

And then finally, the tempter offers Jesus the whole world to rule and to have it worship him. This was the obvious temptation for Jesus to take all of God's power and God's place in the world. Of course, Satan doesn't really have the ability to make this offer to Jesus because the world and all that is in it belongs to God. **But this isn't about power, and Jesus knows that.** Trusting God, Jesus tells the tempter, "I don't think so. We're all called to worship God, not this man you see before you, and certainly not you."

These stories are meant to tell us and teach us that it is in our human nature to want to be God. In Genesis, the tempter promised Adam and Eve that they would be like God if only they would eat from the same tree God ate from; and Jesus was promised all of the attributes of God – the ability to change nature to suit his own purposes; for angels to serve him; and to have the adoration of the world – if only he would allow himself to take God's place.

Jesus was right to trust God. It is right that we trust God. We are called to worship God, and only God – and for that I give thanks.

Have you ever taken responsibility for a big project, something that had a lot of people's hopes riding on it? And have you stayed awake at night, worrying about whether or not all the details are handled? Have you neglected family or friends while you agonized and fretted over the minutiae of that project? ---- That's trying to be the God of your life. It is good to be responsible and even meticulous, but anytime we take that amount of control, it's like we are trying to exercise the power of God in our own lives. We forget about trusting God and maintaining balance in our lives.

You see, we don't really want to be God – not really. We wouldn't want to hear billions of prayers all the time or have to listen to people complain about things not being perfect in their lives. No, what we want is to be

God of **our** lives. We want absolute power over the things around **us**. We want to be able to make it rain when we're hot, and make it stop when we have a barbeque planned. But mostly, we want everything to go **right** in our lives – we want smart, perfectly-behaved children; plenty of money; no worries; perfect teeth, a lush full head of hair and six pack abs. But we KNOW that we can't have those things (or at least ALL those things), yet we try to take hold of all the little details we can, in order to have a sense of control, no matter how illusory that sense may be.

What tempts you to try to be God? Is it the desire to change the choices that your spouse or children make? How about the need to have everyone else think the way you do? Or perhaps you're tempted by the one that gets more people than any other – the need to be perfect. What about these....

- If I don't do it, it won't get done right.
- I know it's taking too long, but if I just work on it for a little while more, I can make it so much better.
- If everybody would just pay attention to me and do it my way, things would turn out the way they should.

Recognize any of those? They're all about trying to be God – trying to control everything in your world so that everything can turn out in YOUR image. That's the greatest temptation of all. Not chocolate or alcohol. Not trusting God. Assuming we can and SHOULD be in complete control.

But we **cannot** be God – we don't have God's power, or ability, or even God's sense of humor, so instead, we end up being pains in someone else's neck rather than being Godly.

Instead of seeking perfection; instead of trying to get everyone around us to be like us; this Lent, let's take a real, honest look at ourselves, and try to change **ourselves** to be more like Christ. Trust God. Appreciate Jesus' temptations and resistance. When we're tempted to judge someone else, or to try to keep a tight hold on all of the details of things; why don't we try to recognize that God is God and we're not, and trust in God's grace and providence.

Amen