

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward 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 glory, 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, "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 morning we find ourselves worshipping on the first Sunday in the season of Lent. It's a time of self-examination and repentance. We think of ourselves walking with Jesus towards Jerusalem where he will suffer and die, paying the ultimate price for our sin. While we know as Christians that confession and repentance of our sin should not be just a once-a-year practice, we recognize the opportunity more clearly during lent.

We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. There are many reasons why we sin. Sometimes we do it without thinking about it, and other times, well, we know what we are about to do is not pleasing to God and may cause problems, but we do it anyhow. The old saying, "The devil made me do it" can be our default excuse for our sin. We find ourselves at the booth of temptation, sometimes mesmerized by what is available there. It can look so good, so right, and Satan will gladly let us have it, saying it is free, but in reality, we sell our souls for the purchase of sin. We separate ourselves from God and the glorious gifts and promises he has for us when we cave-in to temptation.

Sometimes it is so easy to yield to temptation that we don't even realize we've done it. When confronted with our failure we might reason our mistake as this little three-year-old did when confronted by her mother about taking cookies she was told she could not have, at least not yet. The little girl said as she stood atop a chair in the kitchen, eating the forbidden cookies, "I just climbed up to smell them, and my tooth got caught."

There other temptation stories than the one that was read for us this morning in the bible. Another one that likely comes to mind for most of us is the story of Adam and Eve, eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge. This story is actually one of the other texts in the lectionary for today.

The story takes place sometime after the creation of the heavens and the and, of course, the creation of the man and woman. All is right in the world. There's this beautiful garden that Adam and Eve call home; and they have a marvelous relationship with each other and their

Creator God. We envision in our mind's eye a perfect world. They were to care for the garden and enjoy life there. They were told they could freely eat of every tree of the garden except for one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and if they did eat from it they would die.

And then, enters in what is described to us as a serpent who tells them that the threat of eating of that particular tree was all a lie. They wouldn't die; they would just become like God, knowing good and evil. The woman seeing that the food on the tree looked good to eat and hearing that eating of it would make her wiser, she thought what could be the harm in that. It didn't sound like a bad thing. So, she ate, and she gave some to Adam, who also ate from the tree. After eating, suddenly everything in their lives was different—what we might call paradise was gone.

We know that; indeed, they did not die—at least not in the physical sense. The death they experienced was separation from God; and with that, naturally came consequences as the choice to sin always brings with it consequences.

We might ask ourselves was there actually a serpent that spoke to them, enticing them to eat from the forbidden tree? Did they have a face-to-face confrontation with the evil one? We might even ask if God really messed up when he even put the tree in the garden and then told them that they could not eat from it? The reality is that no one knows whether there was actually a serpent who spoke to them; but most assuredly, they were confronted by the evil one when temptation spoke to their hearts.

What this story points out to us is that before us, every day, is the choice to live as a child of God, who is our Heavenly Father—Creator of the Heavens and the Earth—or to belong to the god of self. We are faced regularly by the evil one appealing to our minds and hearts through the influential force of temptation. Whichever we choose will define who we are and how we will live. Our choice makes a difference. The good news is that we can overcome the force of temptation because there is a force even more powerful than it.

Today's text found in Matthew's gospel tells us that even Jesus faced temptation. Up until the time of this story things were not all that rough for Jesus. We read of his lineage. We are given glimpses of things that happened during his childhood and the ways that God protected his young Son from threats. We find the story of Jesus' baptism, and we read God's proclamation that Jesus is his beloved Son with whom He is well pleased.

And then it seems that almost immediately after his baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There he was alone and he prayed and fasted for forty days and forty nights. Since the wilderness was not a place where a lot of people would choose to hang out, it certainly gave Jesus an place of solitude to commune with God and gain some focus for the ministry he was about to begin. This wilderness experience, including the devil's temptation, was an initiation of sorts into the beginning of his ministry on earth.

Temptation can be understood as, and should be understood as, in most cases of New Testament scripture as testing. We use the word temptation to describe Jesus' experience in the wilderness. "Peirazein" is the original Greek word translated for us to mean tempt. William Barclay in his commentary of Matthew Barclay suggests that the English word, *tempt*, in our understanding has a consistently bad meaning. He says, tempting always means to entice a man to do wrong, to seek to seduce him into sin, to try to persuade him to take the wrong way.

But *peirzein*, Barclay says, has a quite different element in its meaning. It means to *test* far more than it means to *tempt* in our sense of the word. To test, according to the dictionary, means to take measures to check quality, performance, or reliability of something or someone, especially before putting it into widespread use or practice

When the Union Pacific Railroad was under construction, an elaborate trestle bridge was built over a certain large canyon in the West as part of the plan to connect St. Louis and California. Before it was open for commercial use, the construction engineer wanted to test its strength. He loaded a train with extra heavy cars and equipment to double its normal payload. The train was driven out to the middle of the bridge where it was to remain for an entire day. One worker complained, "Are you trying to break this bridge?" "No," said the engineer. "I'm trying to prove that the bridge is unbreakable." So, too, does temptation prove our strength under pressure."

In today's story, Jesus is put to the test. Why? Perhaps, to help Jesus, focus on who he was and his purpose on earth, reinforcing his commitment to God and God's plan. Also, his testing most certainly is a witness to us as to who he was and how we too can rise to a sound level of commitment to God and God's purposes for each of us.

Did you ever think about the fact that the only way we even know about this experience is because Jesus had to tell the story to someone, most likely his trusted disciples. Remember, he was in the wilderness alone. He makes himself vulnerable later, then, by laying open his heart and inmost thoughts to tell this story. He tells us what he, God's own Son, went through. In telling his story, he commiserates with us and says he can help us through similar experiences.

Jesus tells us he was faced with three different tests. We're told that Satan, knowing he was hungry, appealed to Jesus' physical need, telling Jesus that he certainly had the power to turn stones into bread so he could receive some nourishment. There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with this appeal. One needs to eat to survive. But at that moment in time Jesus was fasting and focusing on spiritual nourishment. So, he told Satan, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The second test has Satan taking him to the Holy City and had him standing on the highest point of the temple. The evil one told him to throw himself down, assuring him that the scriptures say the angels of God would save him. Jesus responded to this test saying, "It is written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

And finally, the third test involved the devil taking Jesus to a very high mountain where he showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said, "I will give you all of this if you will simply bow down and worship me." To this test, Jesus replied, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Through the facing of these test, one thing we learn is the kind of person Jesus as God's Son really is. We learn that Jesus will not use whatever powers he possesses to satisfy his own needs; he instead relies on God to nurture and support him. He shows us his confidence in knowing that God really does care for him in a special way. He didn't need nor was he willing to settle for public verification, or validation that he was special to his Father God, and that **he** had a special purpose.

Jesus wasn't willing to compromise his relationship with God and God's purposes for the enjoyment of using his power for his own glory. He chose to worship God and God alone. He chose to surrender control of his life to God and God's will. He chose obedience to the plan of God for humanity, to relinquish the power he had to control others so others could choose a life of faith and obedience to God. Jesus' goal was to do everything to the glory of God. Jesus knew who he was, whose he was, and what he was sent to earth to do, and nothing, nothing, was going to sway him in a different direction.

We learn then from Jesus' commitment to these ends that he is God's Son who can be trusted. He faced challenges that invited him to embrace an easier path, to buy into a worldview

that idolizes power and guarantees official recognition. He was thrust into a choice between two opposing authorities, two types of existence, two ways of defining himself. Jesus emerged from the challenge as one tested and found genuine, tried and found trustworthy. This is the Jesus we know as the one we can count on today, alive and present in our world. This is the Jesus we can count on to be by our side when we face our own temptations and tests.

“We learn also from this story of Jesus’ testing, clues that instruct us about our own existence. Jesus’ persistence in understanding himself in terms of God’s grace, his patient trust, which refuses the presumptuous temptation to force God’s hand, his undivided commitment, which frees him to reject enticing alternatives – all become characteristics of faithful disciples. Jesus shows us what it means to be faithful in our own lives.” (Texts for Preaching; A lectionary commentary based on the NRSV – Year A, page 190.)

The story ends on a positive note. Jesus rejects Satan. He tells him to get lost, he has no power over Jesus. This, however, would not be the last time Jesus would be tempted. Remember when his disciple Peter scolded Jesus when Jesus said that he must suffer and die as a part of God’s plan, Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me Satan, you don’t belong here.” Satan had no power over Jesus, only God did.

Satan returns to knock on our doors again with attempts to put us to the test, in hopes we will fail, so that evil can gain power over us. But the secret in keeping the tempter at bay is out: it is in being faithful to one’s calling to be God’s child, clinging steadfastly to that divine calling. We simply need to say “No” when evil comes knocking at our heart and mind’s door. We have help to do this.

A little girl once said in response to a question about how to deal with temptation: “When Satan comes knocking at the door of my heart, I send Jesus to answer the door. When Satan sees Jesus, he says, ‘Oops, I am sorry, I must have the wrong house.’” Remember this the next time Satan comes knocking at your door. Amen.