

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**

**March 6, 2022**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

The reading for the day, this first Sunday of Lent, is one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus temptation in the wilderness. All three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark & Luke, contain the story of Jesus temptation. Even the book of Hebrews makes mention of it. To fully understand any story in scripture it is helpful to look at what surrounds the text, to know what comes before and after. It may give us clues or give us a fuller appreciation for what a text might mean. Before the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, Matthew 3 tells us about Jesus being baptized by John. And even in the liturgical calendar, this is reinforced as we heard last week, Jesus has been identified as the son of God at his transfiguration, when out of the cloud the voice of God spoke the same words at Jesus own baptism. “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Right before the story of the temptation, we hear God saying, “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And then we get the story of the temptation.

Listen for the word of God:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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.’”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The first temptation seems simple, to turn a stone into bread. Jesus has been fasting for 40 days, he is beyond hungry. In my house, we call this sort of intense hunger, being hangry; where you are hungry and angry at the same time. When you are hangry, you just aren’t able to function properly, let alone fight temptation. Maybe you have seen those Snickers commercials from a few years back, where the person who is hungry is replaced by an antagonistic Joe Pesci; The actor who has made a living being ruthless gangsters in films. It’s not a pretty sight. I know it’s not a good idea to talk about anything important right after school with either of my children until they have had a snack. My wife Kelly squirrels away food in her car to fend off her inner Joe Pesci. I imagine that Jesus was hangry, and the devil suggests that he could end his hunger by simply changing a stone to bread.

But Jesus, we learn, is not self-serving. He does not use his powers to meet his own needs. Instead Jesus, as described in the gospels, declares that his ministry is about others. His work is focused on the needs of others.

The second test has the devil telling Jesus to throw himself off the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus knows what is to come, he will foretell what will take place. Jesus is walking toward Jerusalem, to his eventual death. Perhaps the devil is testing Jesus to end it all here and now, to forgo the suffering that is to come. Perhaps it foreshadows Jesus again in Jerusalem, but this time on top of a cross being taunted by onlookers to save himself and come down to prove that he is the son of God, the true Messiah. But once again, Jesus refuses this test and shows us, ultimately that his ministry, his mission is not about saving himself, but about saving others. He must continue on his journey and ultimately to the cross.

The third temptation, or test, is around power. Jesus is offered authority over all the kingdoms of the world. This would certainly meet the expectations of many that the coming Messiah would rule with a strong arm and a mighty army. However, Jesus defies our expectations and refuses this misuse of his power. His kingdom is to be ruled differently, not through force or coercion. Jesus is not interested in exerting power over others, rather his mission is to save others, and to proclaim God's favor.

At each turn, Jesus defies the expectations, and our own experience, of being self-serving, of concerning himself with his own needs, exercising his own power, of listening to the powerful and seductive voice to turn from God. Jesus doesn't succumb, he passes the test.

There are commentators and writers that have talked about the temptation of Jesus and his ability to turn away from them without using miracle, and power, and spectacle as the ultimate example of what we should strive to be like. That we can meet the evil forces that seek to tempt us – that we should be like Jesus. WWJD – what would Jesus do?

But here's the problem – we aren't Jesus. We can't possibly live up to the example that Jesus sets. How many of us in the face of no food for 40 days would change that stone into a loaf of bread and satisfy our hunger? I know what would happen in my house. How many of us might be tempted to misuse our power or clamber after power for power's sake? I've seen it done, if I am honest, I have done it myself. We cannot possibly live up to Jesus' example – that's the bad news. But the good news, is that we don't have to. That's not our job. We are not the authors of our own salvation – that is what Jesus is for. We are not expected to be Jesus – but we are expected to follow him and be like him, as much as possible. In following him, we are able to turn away from believing that we have to do it all and are able also to turn toward others.

Jesus knows we cannot live up to his perfect example, that we will fail. But it also doesn't mean we shouldn't try to be like him – we should. Because the more we follow Jesus's way, the more we try to become like him, the more we can get away from our own self-centered nature and the more we can become like Jesus. The more we confess our sin and strive to do better, the more we are connected to Jesus.

This is partly what the season of Lent is about. It is a time when we can be more intentional about practicing the ways of Jesus. It is a time when we can give up part of ourselves so that we can recognize the places we fall short and ask God to fill those empty or bare places so that we can be more Christ-like. Lent is the time for confessing our failures and redirecting our steps to the way of Jesus. Lent is a time when we can, through the power of the Holy Spirit, actively focus on resisting the temptations that meet us in our wilderness and actively seek to be more faithful disciples. Lent is a time when we can recall the goodness of God and seek to put our trust in God. This is one of the lessons of Jesus's temptation – that our trust belongs in God.

One commentator suggests that the devil is not so much a deceiver, as he is someone who sows the seeds of distrust.<sup>i</sup> Listen to the temptations that the devil puts before Jesus and hear the seed of doubt behind each one. Turn this stone into bread – you may go hungry. Throw yourself down to see if God’s angels will catch you – how do you know God is trustworthy? Have all the kingdoms in the world – you may not have enough.

Every reply that Jesus makes shows his reliance and trust in God for his identity. And maybe that is the thing that we need to pay attention to most. Maybe that’s what we need to hold onto – our identity in God. While we might be inclined, tempted even, to think of the interactions between Jesus and the devil in terms of status or power, they actually have a lot to do with identity. The words that Jesus and that we hear directly before the temptation in the wilderness are “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” It’s about identity. “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

“While the “content” of the devil’s temptations includes the capacity to turn stones to bread, call upon angels for safety, and the promise of power and dominion, each again is primarily about identity. Notice that the devil begins by trying to undermine the identity Jesus had just been given at his baptism in the previous scene. “*If you are the son of God,*” that is, functions to call that identity into question.”

And, it must be noted, too, “that Jesus resists this temptation not through an act of brute force or sheer will, but rather by taking refuge in an identity founded and secured through his relationship with God, a relationship that implies absolute dependence on God and identification with all others. Jesus will be content to be hungry as others are hungry, dependent on God’s Word and grace for all good things. He will be at risk and vulnerable as are all others, finding safety in the promises of

God. And he will refuse to define himself or seek power apart from his relationship with God, giving his worship and allegiance only to the Lord God who created and sustains him.”<sup>ii</sup>

Identity. As one writer says, “Identity. It’s always God’s first move. Before we do anything wrong and before we do anything right, God has named and claimed us as God’s own. But almost immediately, other things try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong.”<sup>iii</sup>

“Each day we are besieged by countless advertisements that seek to create in us a sense of lack, insecurity, and inadequacy, undermining our God-given gift of identity with the promise that if we buy this car or use that deodorant or make our teeth brighter, we will be acceptable. The message of the consumer-consumption culture is simple: you are not enough. Not skinny enough, smart enough, pretty enough, strong enough, rich enough to deserve respect, love, and acceptance. And here’s the thing: it’s a lie, a demonic attempt at a kind of identity theft far worse than the one we’ve been told to fear. And Jesus offers us a way out, a way to safeguard our identity by lodging it in God’s good gift and promise.”<sup>iv</sup>

We have all these things telling us that we are not enough, or even worse trying to tell us to be something we are not, trying to define our identity – but only God can do that. Everything else is temptation.

Maybe the devil approaches Jesus in the wilderness and starts by saying, “if you are the Son of God...” because it is not in our search for power and status where we are vulnerable, but rather it because there is temptation about being insecure in our identity as God’s beloved children, and not trusting our relationship with God.

“If God’s first move is to give us our identity, then the forces against God (in whatever way you want to name that), maybe is to call that

identity into question. To whisper in our ear that we are not enough. Surely God doesn't call us beloved. Maybe we are tempted, as someone wrote, "to doubt our innate value precisely to the degree that we are insecure about our identity from, and our relationship to, God."<sup>v</sup>

There is a story about the great Reformer, Martin Luther. It's said that when Martin Luther felt oppressed by his conscience or plagued by doubt, fear, or insecurity, he would sometimes shout out in defiance, echoing Jesus' words today, "Away with you Satan! I am baptized!" Not I was baptized, but I am baptized.

Martin Luther was shouting out to his demons and whatever was tormenting him and challenging with his true identity. He was making the claim loudly that the promise of God is what gives us our identity. That it is God that names and claims us. God has declared us worthy of love, dignity, and respect. It is God that has declared, through Jesus that God is for us throughout all of our lives.

There are times when you will hear the "if" – if I was enough, if I was skinnier, if I was smarter, if I was really loved, if I really belong to God... There, I am sure, have been times when you have felt or will feel inadequate or unworthy – where your demons and the darkness will come to torment you. But, I think we should take a cue from Martin Luther – and when that happens – shout to the heaven's "I am baptized." And remember that we are God's and nothing and nobody gets to tell us otherwise.

*Invite people to shout I am baptized!*

<sup>i</sup>David Lose, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear\\_wp.aspx?article\\_id=668](http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=668)

<sup>ii</sup>David Lose <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3088>

<sup>iii</sup>Nadia Bolz-Weber Pastrix page 138-139

<sup>iv</sup>David Lose <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3088>  
<sup>v</sup>Bolz-Weber, 139.