

**Sermon Lent 1 Feb 26, 2023**

**Gospel Reading Matthew 4:1-11**

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And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

*Matt 3:16-17*

No that wasn't the third reading for today, that was what came immediately before. It came so long ago – Jan 8 – that we need to refresh our memory of it to set the stage for the reading today. Jesus comes to John to be baptized, and John says it should be Jesus baptizing him. Both Jesus and John know there is something special about Jesus. John demurs when Jesus comes to be baptized by him, and Jesus doesn't deny John's deference, he just sets it aside for the time being. The baptism happens, and then **wham!** Jesus sees the Spirit of God descending on him. And a voice from heaven declares him to be "My son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Wow. You're in the prime of your life, you take God very seriously and do your carpentry to the best of your ability and study scripture in the synagogue and provide for your family and treat your customers honestly and go to the Temple on the major feasts and pay your Temple tax and your city tax and take the occasional pilgrimage to see your cousin in prophetic action and **Bam!** You are the Son of God. Not actually something anyone in their right mind would want to be. And Jesus hasn't even done anything special yet. At least nothing the Gospel of Matthew knows about.

At this point the Spirit leads Jesus away. And that's a good thing, because when you have just been whomped by God you need someone to come and lead you. The Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, where, according to Matthew, he gets forty days of fasting and peace and quiet to work things through. But the Spirit's purpose wasn't just for Jesus to go on long retreat. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. This was bootcamp.

There are several things worth noting here. First, Matthew explicitly refers to the devil as "the tempter." This reminds us that the devil, or better Satan, ha Satan, is a heavenly being with a particular role, a role assigned to him by God, the role of tempter. Remember Job? Satan doesn't show up now because tempting the Son of God seems like a fun thing to do; it's Satan's

JOB. All kinds of temptations are going to come down the pike in Jesus' way towards the Cross. This is bootcamp. Satan is Sarge.

And any good drill sergeant knows the rookies' weak spots. Temptations are very personal. If you want to tempt someone successfully, you need to know that person's priorities and vulnerabilities. You need to know that person's values. You need to know that person. What may tempt one person beyond their ability to resist, may leave another totally cold.

Another thing about temptations: the tempter is a master at bait-and-switch, a consummate con artist. If you know the story of Faust, or the musical *Damn Yankees*, or the old Peter Cooke & Dudley Moore movie *Bedazzled*, you'll recognize this. When you buy into a temptation, you don't always get what you thought you were going to get. And if you do get exactly what you asked for, you often discover you didn't really want that very much after all.

A third thing about temptation: it can sometimes be hard to tell the difference between a temptation and a vocation. Is this something you are being tempted to do because you want to do it and are good at it irrespective of all the reasons you perhaps shouldn't be doing it? Or is this something you are being called to do to bring the love of God closer? Run of the mill everyday temptations can be pretty obvious, but often when a serious choice has to be made, you can only trust that God's faith in you and your love for God will lead you in the right way.

In fact, the serious temptations, the consequential temptations, are always challenges to our trust in God's faith in us. The serious temptations are challenges to the habits of trusting in God that we have built up over a lifetime of managing daily temptations. And that is where we find Jesus in the desert: being tempted to prove that the words he heard at his baptism are true, that God's declaration of him as Beloved and Son is real. Jesus is being tempted to try out his powers so as to prove to himself that he is God's Son.

The first temptation is obvious. Jesus is famished. And, hey, God has been known to provide bread in the wilderness before. There's a bunch of stones lying around. If you're really the Son of God, you can command them to become bread. Feed yourself, feed all the hungry. What kind of Son of God are you if you can't even turn stones into bread? And Jesus uses scripture, in good Rabbinic tradition, to respond. He does not need to magic bread into being. Every word

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that comes from the mouth of God is sustenance to him. "But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Note, this scripture quote does not say Every word written in Scripture, but rather "Every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus uses this scripture to authenticate the very words he heard from the mouth of God at his Baptism. "A voice from heaven said "This is my Son, my Beloved...." These words out of the mouth of God are the words Jesus must live by, the words that inscribe and sustain Jesus for life. Jesus will not use parlor tricks to test these words he received from the mouth of God.

The second temptation asks Jesus to tempt God. Satan suggests that Jesus make a spectacular stage entrance, leaping down from the temple pinnacle and being borne up by angels. If Jesus really is God's Son, God won't let any harm come to him. Scripture has promised that. But Jesus counters that temptation squarely with a quote from Deuteronomy. "Do not put God to the test." This temptation is a form of blackmail against God, another way of saying to God, "Do you really mean what you said?" Jesus will not allow any of his own uncertainty to come between himself and God.

The third temptation is a flat-out challenge to just cut to the chase, avoid the slog and suffering that lie ahead and get dominion over the kingdoms of the earth the easy way, by worshipping Satan. Jesus could do so much good for the world with no pain to himself.... Jesus flatly repudiates that with the prime directive of his faith, "You shall worship the Lord your God only, and you shall serve God only." No prostrations, no tribute to anyone but God can bring the world any good. Then Jesus exercises his authority by banishing Satan, and the temptations are done. For now. There will be more temptations in Matthew. There will be those who ask for a sign, and Jesus will tell them they will get only the sign of Jonah. In Gethsemane, Jesus will ask to be spared the coming passion, and then he will reject his own will and commit himself to the will of God. Bystanders at the Crucifixion will echo Satan, taunting Jesus to prove himself by coming down from the high place of the cross and saving himself.

But now, Jesus has passed basic training, and angels do come and minister to him. Not hunger nor self-doubt nor the desire to do good the easy way has come between Jesus and God who has called him.

And we are called to go into our Lent and confront our own temptations. So what is a temptation? Seriously, it's not chocolate. Well, it could be chocolate, but a broader definition is this: A temptation is anything that I might permit to come between me and God. Let me say that again: A temptation is anything that I might permit to come between me and God. And that includes the fear that paralyzes us, the self-doubt that crowds out our trust in God.

God does not want the death of a sinner, God wants us to love God and delight in God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength. And with all our weaknesses and all our temptations. All the sins I avoid attest to the strength I receive from God and love that flows between me and God. All the sins I fail to avoid attest to the gracious God who reaches out to my weakness and the hope and faith I have in reaching back to God for forgiveness.

In refusing Satan's temptation to turn stones into bread, Jesus reminds us that before our basic need for food comes our most basic need for God. In refusing the temptation to test the commitment of God to him, Jesus reminds us to take God's promises at face value and trust them absolutely. In refusing the temptation to sidestep the hard work of bringing in God's kingdom, Jesus reminds us that God's kingdom overrules all the kingdoms of this world, and God only is worthy of our worship.

And if, at the end of Lent, at the end of all our Lents, we have managed to do what we committed to do and avoid doing what we said we would not do, we will be invited to the feast of the Resurrected Lord. If, at the end of Lent, at the end of all our Lents, we have failed to do what we committed to do and done those things which we said we would not do, we will, as John Chrysostom so eloquently reminds us in his Catechetical Homily, be invited to the feast of the Resurrected Lord. Because having passed through all **his** temptations, our Lord finds it his own great pleasure to give forgiveness and grace freely to us all. And we will find that nothing can, in the end, separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.