

Sunday March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Lent II

Mark 4:1-11  
“Who Is He?”

I recognize that today is actually the second Sunday of Lent and the Gospel lesson is the lesson for last week, for those of you following such things. But I haven't actually wrestled with the story of Jesus temptation in a long time and yet it is a very important story. So, I moved the lesson to today and hope it is as challenging a passage for you as it was for me. To begin however, let me tell you of an experience many of us can appreciate.

There was a man who was overweight and he decided that he had some excess pounds to lose. He was very diligent and stuck to his diet very strictly. He even had a new route to work so that he wouldn't drive by his favorite bakery in the morning. However, one day, he came into work with a big coffee cake. His coworkers started to scorn him and he said that he could explain. He said "you see I "accidentally" drove past my favorite bakery today and I saw all these delicious coffee cakes out on the display case.

So, I prayed. I prayed to God and said, 'if you really think I should have this delicious coffee cake, have an open parking spot right in front of the bakery.' And soon enough there was a parking spot on my 8th time around!"

Temptations are a part of all our lives. If we draw breath, we will at some point, actually many points, be tempted. Every week, we pray the Lord's prayer in which we pray. 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.' But it is an ongoing struggle. Jesus knew it would be, and I wonder if teaching us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation" is out of his reflection on his wilderness temptation experience.

There needs to be a cautionary note inserted here though. Often when we read the temptation story in Jesus' life, our first impulse is to draw comfort from the fact that Jesus experienced this scourge of humanity as we do. But hold on a minute. Is this an accurate understanding of the temptation story? Read carefully what Satan tempts Jesus with.

The things that tempt me are so different from Jesus. I am never tempted to jump off a high building to test God's care of me, but that extra donut, I'm all over that. Could it be that something more is going on here than what I normally face. Philip Yancy (The Jesus I Never Knew) suggests that Satan tested Jesus as he did, because he wasn't sure who Jesus actually was. At least not at the beginning. Satan was wondering, "Who is this man?"

The British poet Gerard Manley Hopkins presented the temptation story as a kind of get-acquainted session between Satan and Jesus. Satan is pictured as in the dark about the incarnation. Was Jesus just an ordinary man, or an angel with limited powers like himself, or was he the incarnation of God? His challenges to Jesus were really a way to get Jesus to reveal his true nature. The implications of this are quite eye opening.

Martin Luther speculated that throughout his life, Jesus "conducted himself so humbly and associated with sinful men and women and was as a consequence not held in high esteem", on account of which the devil overlooked him.

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It is beginning to appear as though the temptation story unmasked Satan, but God's agenda remained hidden. *If you are God, said Satan, then dazzle me. Act like God should act.* Jesus' reply is that only God makes those decisions, therefore I do nothing at your command. No matter how weakened by hunger or worn out by the desert heat, Jesus knew who was in charge and it wasn't Satan, which literally mean "the Accuser".

Consider also for a moment that what Satan offered was so tempting, because it was a major improvement on the human condition. Satan tempted Jesus to take the good part of being human, while rejecting the bad parts. We might say, "Who could blame him for giving in?" In other words, Satan wanted Jesus to deny the full impact of the incarnation. To wear the crown and not the cross.

Maybe we are honest enough to consider that maybe Jesus should have, taken Satan up on his offer. Maybe life would be so much better, knowing that if we are hungry, a rock will suddenly turn to bread. Wouldn't it be great that in the midst of a serious deliberation about what a community should do, a big billboard appears in the sky letting us know what we should do. Could Jesus not have taken a more hands on approach to be the Messiah?

We are not the first people to consider this. I don't know how familiar you are with what are called the Apocryphal gospels. These are depictions of Jesus the church fathers rejected, primarily, do to their depictions of Jesus,

In these apocryphal accounts, Jesus succumbs to Satan's temptation. The child Jesus is portrayed as making a clay sparrow, and bringing it to life. He is pictured as dropping a dead fish into water and having it miraculously start swimming. He turned his playmates into goats to teach them a lesson, and made people blind or deaf just for the thrill of healing them. The apocryphal Jesus is more akin to a comic book hero, than what the true gospels portray.

Jesus showed a resistance to bend the rules on how the world works. The temptation stories actually revolve around the very questions Jesus' countrymen wrestled with. What would the Messiah look like? Would he be the people's Messiah turning rocks into bread? Would he be the Torah Messiah, standing tall on the pinnacle of the temple? Would he be a King Messiah ruling all the kingdoms of the world?

Satan is offering Jesus a chance to become the Messiah we would want. Honestly, we frankly do not want a suffering, Messiah. And if we are honest, as Jesus prayed in the garden, neither did he. The temptation to avoid the cross surfaces again, when Peter recoiled at Jesus' prediction of his death. Peter urged Jesus to stop saying such things. Jesus replied, "Out of my sight Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Even on the cross, the same temptation arises as the criminal hanging beside him, scoffs at Jesus. "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us." Spectators to the crucifixion said, "Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe him...Let God rescue him now if he wants him." But as we know; there was no rescue, no miracle, no easy, painless path. For Jesus to save others, quite simply, he could not save himself. Jesus knew that as he faced Satan in the desert.

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Satan, in the wilderness, was also dangling a carrot, so to speak. He offered Jesus a way to speed up the accomplishment of his mission. He could win the people over with food from stones. He could take control of all the kingdoms of the world, all while protecting himself from danger. Milton put it this way, out of Satan's mouth. "Why move thy feet so slow to what is best?"

Dostoevsky, talked about the temptation in his powerful story *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the book, the agnostic brother Ivan writes a poem called the "Grand Inquisitor" set in sixteenth century Seville during the inquisition. In the poem, Jesus visits the city and observes the heretics being burned at the stake every day. The Grand Inquisitor, recognizes Jesus, and throws him in jail. The Grand Inquisitor states that Jesus should have accepted Satan's offer.

Instead of taking possession of men's freedom, you increased it. Burdening the kingdom of mankind with suffering forever. In rejecting Satan's offer, Jesus made it far too easy to reject himself. He surrendered his greatest advantage: to compel belief. Fortunately, the inquisitor states, the church recognized the error and corrected it, and has been relying on miracle, mystery, and authority ever since. For this the inquisitor must execute Jesus again, lest he hinder the church's work.

The Temptation in the wilderness, reveals in stark contrast, the difference between God's power and Satan's power. Satan has the power to coerce, to dazzle, to force obedience, to destroy. Humans have been drawing inspiration from his ways for centuries. At the point of a gun, you can get anyone to do anything.

God on the other hand, has power that works internally and in a noncoercive way. People are not to be enslaved by miracles, but by a faith offered freely. God works from the inside out, even with the inherent failings of human choice. Thomas Merton said, "God is not a Nazi". The Master of the universe would become its victim, powerless before soldiers in a garden. Soren Kierkegaard wrote about God's light touch.

"Omnipotence which can lay its hand so heavily upon the world can also make its touch so light that creatures receive independence". I freely admit that my faith suffers from too much freedom, too many temptations to disbelief. I admit, I wish God would come and just overwhelm me, to overcome my doubts and provide indisputable proof of his existence.

Reading the newspaper or turning on the television, I admit I wish God would take a more active role in human history. Could he not prevent earthquakes, stop the bloodshed in the Ukraine? And don't even get me started thinking about significant historical atrocities. I want God to also take a more active role in my personal history. I want healing for my health issues, protection for my loved ones, theological arguments to persuade my unbelieving friends and neighbours.

In those moments, am I not putting before God the very temptations Satan put before Jesus? But God resists my feeble attempts to tempt him. How like the disciples I am, that I ask God to reign down fire on unrepentant cities. Instead, we remember Jesus saying as he looked upon Jerusalem, "how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you are not willing."

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My Jesus, my Messiah, will not force himself on anyone. The miracles Satan wanted Jesus to perform are the same things I long for but God will have none of it. God will not overwhelm and amaze. God so longs for us to freely love him, that he willingly allows people to live out their lives as if he did not exist. To spit on his face and crucify him. God's nature is self-giving. He is all about sacrificial love.

But instead of embracing Christ's way, we discard his example, and adopt the temptations he avoided. Uncomfortable with the slowness of the Kingdom's advance in our neighbourhoods and even our nation, we choose the other path. And so, the church's history is littered with tragic example after tragic example of efforts to coerce belief, or at least obedience to someone's perception of what faith looks like.

So, we have that awful inquisition that lasted for hundreds of years, or the city of Geneva which made church attendance mandatory lest you be burned as a heretic. Then we have churches that have joined hands with governments thinking that this was the path to greatness. Today the temptation is perpetuated by those who advocate using the tools of politicians and advertisers to manipulate folks into faith.

Yet it is not just the church. In all honesty I too succumb to that age old temptation. I look for shortcuts to meet human needs. Sometimes I feel compelled to compromise to reach a goal. Just like Jesus long ago in that wilderness, I too have the same freedom to succumb to those temptations or resist them. To take matters into my own hands, or patiently wait on God.

Perhaps we could argue that Jesus opted to sacrifice his freedom to accomplish his goals as he wished in refusing Satan's offer. But I am beginning to understand that Jesus's time in the wilderness facing Satan was another demonstration of his love for us. You cannot make unilateral decisions that will affect those that you love. And if Jesus had accepted Satan's offer and challenge, he would have imposed his will on us, but not his love.

Thomas Keller (The Reason for God) rightly points out that love demands our limiting our freedom. In every love relationship we must sacrifice some freedom to have greater intimacy with the one we love. For a love relationship to be truly healthy, there must be a mutual loss of independence. In a love relationship we say to the one we love, "I will adjust to you, but you must adjust to me."

So, did God in his infinite love adjust to us. Yes, he did; in the most significant way. The incarnation of Jesus is the complete picture of adjusting to the one you love. In becoming human, Christ became limited, vulnerable and he could suffer as we do. God was saying to us, "I will, out of a deep love, adjust to you and will serve you even if it means great sacrifice." Love constrains us, and this is true of Jesus as any of us.

And once we finally realize the extent of how Christ change out of love for us and gave himself for us, you are no longer afraid to forego your freedom by finding a new freedom in Christ. What happened in the wilderness was the first of many demonstrations to come of the cost of the incarnation on Jesus. He must have thought so as well, because if he was alone in the wilderness, it must have been Jesus who told the story to his disciples.

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Maybe we've been thinking about this whole temptation thing all wrong. Sure, we have all the freedom we could exercise to do whatever we want. Mind you, in doing so we must be prepared to live with the consequences of exercising freedom. But if I want a mutual relationship of love with God in Christ, then I need to be prepared to reign in my freedom. So could it be that whenever I am being tempted, the Accuser, the Satan, is trying to get me to stop demonstrating my love for God.

To act willfully as an independent person at the expense of an intimate relationship with God. Ever wonder why God talks in the Old Testament about how Israel treated him like a cheating spouse? It's not about dos and don'ts. It never has been. It is all about our willingness to lay down our lives for the one who laid down his for us. That's what Lent is about. It's a remembrance and celebration of God's love for us in Jesus and our invitation to join in that relationship of love.