

Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSVue)

⁴ 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.

Temptation, Testing, and Real Life

Last week, we talked a bit about mountaintop moments: those moments when we feel perhaps closer to God, more attuned to the divine than we do elsewhere or at other times of our lives. And last week, in our scriptures, Jesus was on a mountain, of course, after having been transfigured, and the glory of God was apparent, even if we couldn't stay on the mountain and bask in it. After all, we have work to do in the coming season of Lent.

But this morning, we find ourselves at an earlier point in Jesus's life and ministry: his temptation in the wilderness. Wilderness moments: has anyone ever had one? This means something different to different people, so for the sake of this morning's lesson, let's think about it as a time when we felt, perhaps, utterly alone, unmoored and unsure of the future. Perhaps, during this time, there's some fear, some mystery as to the plan (ours or God's), and a whole lot of uncertainty. In the wilderness, there's space: space to move, to look around and see a whole lot of nothing. Maybe we felt lost, out in the wilderness. Sometimes, in the wilderness, we can feel disconnected from God, if only temporarily. Perhaps that sounds familiar to some of us. Maybe some of us still feel that we're in the wilderness—rambling, ambling, wandering, and wondering what it is that we're doing, or why we're even out there in the first place.

Lent is a time of transformation. It's when we ourselves go out into the wilderness, that we can be closer to God. It's a time for us to be contemplative, exploring how we might do that, as we attune ourselves more closely to the Holy Spirit through spiritual practices and disciplines. Lent is a time for the Holy Spirit to work great things in us, as it always has and always will. Let's talk about that.

Would you please pray with me? ...

Having said what I said about what Lent is, and what the wilderness is, it should come as no surprise to you that Jesus is in the wilderness. It is no accident that he winds up there after his baptism.

He is not lost. He is not being punished for something that he has done wrong. He has been led by the Holy Spirit to be tempted, or tested (and the Greek means both) by the devil. His debates with the devil function as both an assessment of his readiness as God's Son, and proof of it. Christ has the credentials, and the authority, for this mission that has been entrusted to him, and Matthew has set out to prove this from the very beginning: from his birth narrative to his baptism, the evangelist has created a very clear case for Jesus to be the Son of God, the one who will lead a movement towards transformation, into the Realm of God. And here, in the wilderness, Christ is assessed and through his trials with the devil, through his temptations, he is proven to be the one we need.

And again, it is not an accident that all of this happens here, in the wilderness. Throughout scripture, there is plenty of time spent in the wilderness. It's a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God's next move; a place of learning to trust in God's righteousness and mercy. And so, for forty days and nights, Jesus stays here in the wilderness, without food, learning this lesson, waiting for God's move, and preparing himself for all that that entails. Just

like Noah, who endured the rains and flood on the ark for 40 days and nights before God made a covenant to never again destroy the earth with a flood;¹ just like Moses when he fasted on Mount Sinai and received the 10 Commandments;² just like Elijah fasting in the wilderness before being commissioned again by God;³ I could go on. And, friends, just like we do, in this Lenten season, as we participate in Christ's ministry and follow his way toward the cross.

The tests in the wilderness that are Jesus's temptations, are not a one-time ordeal to get through. Instead, they are tests of preparation for the choices Jesus makes in his earthly ministry. Later in Matthew, we can see how Jesus's choices play out. We see how his experience is replayed in his encounters with the sick, the hungry, or the needy; with people who use their connections and power to deduce his loyalty;⁴ with people who worry about the world's assessment of greatness rather than God's.⁵

The devil approaches Jesus and asks three things of him: If you are the Son of God, he says, turn these stones into bread. "You must be starving, and of course God wouldn't want God's precious baby boy to go hungry. Go ahead." In other words, take your fate into your own hands. You have the power to change things all on your own. Why don't you?

And again, he says to Jesus, If you're the Son of God, jump off the temple. "God wouldn't let anything happen to you. You're invincible." Put another way, why don't you see if God really is all that faithful to you? Does it mean anything that you're God's Son, if you don't know for sure? And honestly, maybe you aren't. You need to test what God will do for you.

And the third and final time, the devil offers Jesus all the power and glory the earth can offer if he will just give his own allegiance to the devil instead. Rather than testing God, or picking at the thread of Jesus's identity and hoping he'll unravel, the devil instead bets on the human proclivity for power.

In each case, Jesus turns down these offers, these tests, instead relying on the Word of God, and on his faith in God. When the devil calls Jesus's personhood into question—his station as the Son of God, his abilities, his future, and his fortunes—Jesus lodges these things not in himself, but on God's character and trustworthiness.

It is a fact of life that we also face temptation. Though we may not be tempted in quite the same fashion as Jesus was, we are tempted in the same way. We're encouraged to be self-reliant. We're encouraged to see what is in the world, and either run toward it with open arms, or recoil in horror from it completely. We're tempted into apathy or despair at what the world has become, or to buy wholesale into the latest trends without a thought as to who we are in the middle of everything. We're invited to chase power and wealth, to test God, to tempt one another, and in doing so, we are led away from God and instead into the abuse of ourselves and of one another. I am no less guilty of this than anyone else.

¹ Gen 7-9

² Exod 24:18; 34:27-28; Deut 9:9

³ 1 Kings 19:8

⁴ Matt 16:1; 19:31 22:18, 35

⁵ Matt 18:1-5

Before I continue, another of the lectionary readings for this morning was the story of Adam and Eve's temptation in the garden of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3. I thought about preaching on this story, and decided against it, but now something is making me want to read it to you. It's very unusual that we read another scripture so far into the sermon, I know, but I'd like for you to listen for just a moment to the story. It's not too long.

(Read Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7—*The word of the Lord.*)

What do you notice in this story? I won't ask you to raise your hands and give an answer. But I noticed something as I read these stories together. In the story of Christ's temptation, and that of Adam and Eve's, the question of identity, and trust in God, plays a central role.

Adam and Eve—and I must note that, although Eve speaks, Adam has been with her the whole time—are invited to mistrust God. What's interesting is that, in both Jesus's temptation and Adam and Eve's, the tempter doesn't lie to either one, as far as we can tell. It's quite possible that Jesus could have turned stones into bread, and Jesus does multiply loaves and fishes down the road in his ministry. God tells Adam and Eve that the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil would kill them, but the serpent says it won't, and Adam and Eve don't die. Instead, the serpent sows seeds of mistrust, inviting Adam and Eve to fulfill the deep want and need that is at the core of everyone's being: the temptation to be self-sufficient, to establish our identity on our own, not through God, but through the fruit that is in front of us. This is the temptation that seduces the first humans.

And again, identity is the focus of the devil in Jesus's temptation. "*If you are the Son of God,*" he begins. Hence the core of the temptation: "Wouldn't it be better to know for sure? Go on, turn stone to bread, jump from the Temple, worship me instead of God... and you'll never doubt who you are again. You'll know for sure. You'll be sufficient on your own." And like with Adam and Eve, Jesus's temptation is the same: to be self-sufficient, to have his own identity, not through God, but through his own actions. But Jesus responds by refusing to do so. Instead, he remains dependent on God. Jesus knows *who* he is, by knowing *whose* he is.

To be human is to be aware that we are insufficient. We are not complete in and of ourselves; that lack is a permanent part of our condition. To be human is to be aware, in other words, that we carry inside ourselves a hole that we will always be restless to fill. Adam and Eve see the fruit on the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and they immediately decide that this hole inside of them must be remarkably fruit-shaped. But even after they eat, the emptiness remains. Today, we might decide that this hole in us is shaped like a new car, or a better house, or a new phone, or the right spouse.

But after sacrificing and working and obtaining these things, the emptiness remains. Blaise Pascal once called this essential condition of the human experience "an infinite abyss" in the heart of each person, "which which can only be filled with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God."⁶ Likewise, St Augustine of Hippo said that our hearts are "restless till

⁶ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York; Penguin Books, 1966), 75.

they find rest in (God).”⁷ There is no filling that vacuum, no rest to be found in the world, except in our relationship with God.

But this isn’t the whole picture, either. For I know this as well as anyone else, that hole is still present. Our faith doesn’t allow us to overcome our human nature, nor does it erase the facts of life. We know our limits, and we are painfully aware of them. When we know this hole, this “God-shaped vacuum,” we yearn to fill it, even when we know that nothing will. Our faith in God doesn’t take away our knowledge of it. If anything, it makes this hole even more known. We know that we are limited in how we can live like Christ, how deeply we can love God, how much we can love our neighbor and ourselves. We are limited by the fact that we are human. And yet, God is still with us. Perhaps our faith, if it can’t take away this limit, allows us to find God within those limits. Our faith enables us to see that, even within our human finitudes, we are God’s children. God’s grace, even in our own limited understanding of it, is sufficient for us.

If all of this is true, faith doesn’t do away with the hardships that are part and parcel of this life. Rather, it gives us the courage to stand amid them, not simply surviving but thriving in and through Jesus, the one who was tempted as we are and thereby knows our struggles first hand. This same Jesus, challenged based on his identity—just like we are—invites us to find hope and courage in the God who named not just him, but all of us, beloved children, so that we too might discover who we are. To do that, we also recall *whose* we are. We are God’s. This period of Lent, of prayer and discernment and self-denial and spiritual practices helps us to remember that just a bit better: because we are God’s, we are able to grow, and change, and move ever closer to the kingdom of God. Even if we are never free from sin, we are able to remain steadfast in our identities as God’s beloved.

Because the promise of the gospel is that the one who is with us always, even to the end of the age, has already gone ahead of us, even to the most forsaken places of the wilderness. Nowhere is so desolate, so distant, or challenging that Jesus has not already been there. No test is so great that God has not already overcome it. And no matter where we go, no matter how we are tested or tempted, even though it might feel like we are so cut off from God, we are still with God. To have faith in God is to know this, even when it is hard, and is to trust in this truth as often as we can. Having faith means living into this aspect of our identity, as people made in God’s image. Our Lenten practices and disciplines and walks with God and one another remind us that we are God’s people. In life and in death, we belong to God. And so, we can do the hard work of being reformed and refined into people more like Christ. We can stand to be in the wilderness, and we can stand with our siblings in Christ—whether across the pew, across the street, or across the nation—in being made better than we were yesterday. By our faith in God, we can stand it, so long as we stand together with God. May it be so. Amen.

⁷ St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 1,1.5.