

"Temptations in the Wilderness"
Matthew 4:1-11
January 19, 2020
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Last Sunday we stood on the banks of the Jordan River as John baptized Jesus. We looked on in wonder as the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, rested on Jesus. We heard the voice of God from heaven say, *"This is my Son, the Beloved. He is the delight of my life."*

Jesus' hair wasn't even dry yet when the Holy Spirit whisked him off to the wilderness. This wasn't some post-baptism silent spiritual retreat- this was Messiah boot camp. Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights and then, when he was at his weakest, hungriest point, he was tested by the devil.

The word "devil" used in Matthew is drawn from two Greek words which mean "to throw over or across." It essentially means "one who attacks, misleads, deceives, diverts, discredits, slanders." We find the devil in this text as one who tries to divert Jesus from claiming his true identity as the Son of God.

Immediately after Jesus' true identity is announced publicly, it is tested by the devil, the one who represents all that opposes the will of God. In Scripture, the devil personifies all adversaries of God; all who obstruct and resist God's intentions for human life and creation. Even though the devil was the antagonist in this story, the one whom Jesus really encountered was himself. The devil was there to confront him with the temptations of the world. In facing those temptations, Jesus had to look closely at himself, decide who he really was, and what he would do in the world as the Son of God. Just what kind of Messiah would he be?

In that lonely and desolate place he affirmed his holy calling; he determined the shape and nature of his ministry. Would it be primarily for himself and his own needs or would it be for the world? Would he allow God to guide and lead him or would he just "do his own thing?"

The devil shows his craftiness when he says to Jesus, " **IF** you are the Son of God." He didn't say, "since" you are the Son of God, or "because" you are the Son of God. He said, "If" which is more effective in raising self-doubt than coming right out and saying, "You are not really the Son of God." Nice try, but it didn't work. Jesus wasn't fooled by semantics. Even in his weakest moment, even in the time of his greatest need, Jesus turns to God and God's Word for confirmation of his identity and his role.

Before Jesus could be the true Messiah, he first had to discover the sort of Messiah he would **not** be. Jesus rejected the lies of the devil in the wilderness, he turned away from the slippery promises and in doing so he showed his true colors. Even more than the announcement at the time of his baptism this time of testing reveals who Jesus really is.

Last week I said that Matthew's purpose in writing his Gospel was to help the Jewish Christians in his church to see the connection between their Jewish heritage and traditions and their newfound faith in Jesus. They didn't have to throw away their Jewish foundations to follow Jesus- because he too was a Jew. Jesus came to fulfill, to embody, all of their Jewish teachings and laws. Matthew begins his gospel with Jesus' seventeen verse genealogy—beginning with Abraham. Then he connects Jesus to the line of King David with his story about Joseph accepting his role as the earthly parent of the Messiah. Then Matthew sends Jesus and his parents into exile in Egypt, like the ancient Israelites.

Now, in the wilderness Jesus retraces the adventures of Israel in the wilderness. They wandered for forty years and Jesus fasted for forty days.

Tom Long writes, "Because the temptations Jesus faced are echoes of Israel's temptations, the first readers of Matthew, with their ready knowledge of what we now call the Old Testament, would realize that Jesus is on familiar ground here, reenacting the story of the trials of God's people. Jesus has inherited the legacy of Israel, and now he goes where they went- into the wilderness- to experience what they experienced- a time of testing. Where they failed, he is faithful. Where they stumbled, he walks surely and unwaveringly along the path of God's calling. All that God willed to create in Israel has now come to fruition in this beloved son, Jesus. What this means is that the temptations Jesus encountered are not his alone; they are his, of course, but they are also the temptations of all God's people. Israel faced them; Jesus faced them; and- what is also important for us today- the church continues to face them. The ways in which Jesus was tested symbolize all of the possibilities for doubt, misdirection, faithless choices, and unholy distractions to which God's people are ever at risk." (1)

By telling this story of the temptations in this way, Matthew was reminding his readers- and us- that these are the temptations of those who are called to live as God's faithful people in the world. *"This story is about the kinds of trials and testings that happen to people- to Israel, to Jesus, and to the church- when they are called to be God's people and to do God's work in the world. The testing of Jesus, the testings of Israel before him, and the testing of the church today are not primarily temptations to **do** what we would really like to do, but know we should*

*not; they are temptations to **be** someone other than who God calls us to be, to deny that we are God's children." (2)*

The temptations the devil threw at Jesus were mainly about meeting his own needs, testing God's faithfulness, and choosing whom to serve. Food, power, and leadership. Jesus was tempted with self-interest. He was invited to choose an easier path; to choose between two opposing authorities, two types of existence, two ways of defining himself.

In an effort to distort Jesus' identity, the devil actually confirms it. He will show up again later in the story- but now- from the very beginning we know who wins. This story tells Matthew's readers- and us- that there is no place so desolate, so distant, so challenging that we may find ourselves that Jesus has not already been there. There is no test, no temptation we may face that he has not already faced and overcome.

We face temptations as individuals and the church as a whole faces them as well. Jesus' first temptation was to turn a stone into bread when he was famished. This test encouraged him to focus on himself and his own needs. The church fails this test when Christians do everything they can to remain within the protective walls of their own building; when they refuse to reach out to those in need; when they refuse to welcome those who are not like them. That is when the church turns into a social club instead of a gathering of disciples.

The second temptation was to jump off a tower and see if God would protect him. Jesus refused to test God. The church tests God when it promises prosperity to those who believe the "right" way. When a church promises good fortune and only good things to its members, it is succumbing to the devil's temptation to test God- to see if God will really keep God's promises.

The final test was an offer to worship the devil and gain the whole world. Probably the most prevalent temptation the church in the United States fails today is the choice to worship anyone or anything other than God. Churches bow down to nation, race, family, social standing, success, prosperity. Any time the church chooses an easier path than the path of Jesus- we are worshiping the golden calf like the Hebrew people in the wilderness. Whenever our attention turns from our God to the newest, shiniest, attention-getting, quick-fix celebrity minister or mega church- we are failing the test.

This story makes me wonder, how are we, as a congregation tempted? What tests and trials do we encounter as we try to remain faithful to God's call in our lives? When is our identity as a family of faith challenged? When do we fail these trials and when do we triumph?

For this congregation, I think our temptations include:

- Thinking we aren't enough.
- Thinking we don't have enough- people, money, faith.
- Thinking that we cannot make a difference in the world.

Of course, there are good reasons for each of these

fears and temptations- but when we focus only on our fears we fail to see what we do have. When we see only what we think we lack- we are blind to the grace and wonder in our midst. Walking the path of Jesus is not easy- ministry can be messy and discouraging. It can be slow. It can be hard work. There are times when it is really difficult to be the people God has called us to be and to love the people God has called us to love.

When Jesus was in the wilderness being tested by the devil he found that his identity was confirmed, his calling was affirmed, his vocation was clarified. He knew that the road ahead would be a constant challenge as he helped his disciples to keep their eyes on God- and God alone. He knew who he was- now he had to help his followers find out who they were.

Matthew included this story so his people would know that Jesus can be trusted. In all of the challenges he faced, he chose to be faithful to God. Matthew shows that Jesus is dependable, reliable, worthy of our confidence, and stronger than anything we might face. Through the temptations, Jesus shows us that it is when our lives are difficult that we choose who we will be. And it is in those difficult times that God is faithful.

Jesus' role as God's Son was placed in the crucible of temptation and he emerged true to his identity.

He seems to think we can too.

Amen.

End Notes:

- *MATTHEW, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox, 1997. Pg. 36.*
- *Long, pg. 36-37.*