

The Devil Would Like a Word with You

Matthew 4:1-11

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We continue with the story of Jesus as told in the Gospel of Matthew. We're reading today from chapter 4. All of you are welcome to Bible study online tomorrow at noon or 7:30 where we are working through the whole of the Matthew text. Today's story is traditionally read at the beginning of Lent, a time of introspection. Before Jesus ever teaches or heals or feeds anyone, he goes to an abandoned place to be alone. There, he encounters a shadowy figure who confronts Jesus with extraordinary tests. Hear the story from Matthew 4, verse 1.

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 Jesus 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 God only.' "

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

To understand what is happening here in chapter 4, we go back and remember what happened to Jesus in Chapter 3. Samantha Hudson opened that text for us a few weeks ago. In chapter 3, John the Baptist—wild, severe, repentance-demanding John—welcomes thousands of spiritual pilgrims to the waters of the river for a dunking that would change their lives. Jesus is one of those pilgrims. John baptizes Jesus. Dripping wet, Jesus comes out of the water, and a pigeon (a dove) flies down... the embodiment of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God "rests" on Jesus—and a voice—whose voice?—says, "you are my Beloved Child." The Spirit—the power and personal presence of God—is on and with and in this wet man. At the moment of his baptism, Jesus' identity is sealed—as the human in whom the being of God is found.

Jesus does not go from Baptism straight into ministry. There is another place to which he must go first. Where? It is an empty place. A place where all the comforts and banalities, all the usual rhythms and the numbing sense of normal—does not reach. The wilderness is a symbolic place. It is the place outside of life-as-it-is; it where you are alone and vulnerable. Nothing around you marks who you are. The wilderness also is the place where the God—who goes by the name "I AM"—is likely to meet you.

Jesus goes there after his identity as the Son of God imprinted upon him—but the ink is not yet dry. It is not clear yet what that identity means. The same Spirit who confirms his identity in baptism leads Jesus into the lonely place to have it tested.

Jesus fasts. Fasting is an old practice to purify the self. You subject yourself to hunger to see if there is a will inside of you that is separable from and stronger than your instinct to satisfy your needs. But after 40 days, Jesus is at the end of time a person can endure without food.

Then, “he” shows up. (picture) Who is he? He goes by 3 different names in this passage, implying his identity is elusive: he is the diabolos (devil), the peirazo (tempter) and Satan (Satan).

This character is old, his roots in the ancient cultures of the near east. There, in royal courts, a ruler’s decisions could never be challenged: no one can refute a king and live. But a king who never gets questioned makes terrible decisions. So in some courts, there emerged a role for someone whose job it was to question the king. This role, sometimes called “the Accuser” or “the Adversary,” has a name in Hebrew, “ha Satan.” The Greek translation “diabolos” means “the slanderer.” So think of this old character not as a guy with pointy horns and a tail, the head of armies of darkness—think of this character as one who does his necessary job when he shows you another path, another way, another choice you might like to make... if you would just think about it.

The Tempter appears to Jesus when he is at his weakest. The Tempter offers 3 choices:

1. Turn stones into bread.
2. Force God’s hand into saving you.
3. Treat me, the Tempter, as the real ruler.

In this back-and-forth between Jesus and the Tempter, you’ll notice something about their conversation: they’re not “just” talking—what do you hear? They’re quoting scripture to each other. These two are engaged in a pretty fierce interpretive battle using Scripture. The Tempter is trying to get Jesus to re-define who God is, and what it means for a person to be in a covenant relationship with God. The Tempter is pushing Jesus: What *exactly* does God promise you? Is that what you *really* want? What *exactly* do you promise God in return? Is that what you *really* want? It’s not just a conversation about bread and power; it’s about our entire covenant relationship with God.

These two are talking in the present-tense but they are doing it by re-visiting one of the pivotal moments in the relationship between us and God. If you didn’t notice it, the Tempter and Jesus are quoting texts—mostly from Deuteronomy—that were written to remember the moment just after God delivered us from slavery in Egypt when we were in our own wilderness. There, in our hunger and thirst and fear and fear and doubt, we almost turned our backs on this whole project to be God’s Beloveds.

Remember the story. In the wilderness long ago, we were desperately hungry. And we said, “at least in Pharaoh’s slave camps, we had food.” The Tempter remembered that desperate hunger he says, “wouldn’t it be better if you just took care of your own needs first?” But Jesus remembered that God gave us manna to eat, and that every day there was enough for everyone. And he says to the Tempter, “We don’t live by bread only.”

The Tempter goes back to the story, he remembers how thirsty we were in the wilderness, dying for a drink and how bitterly we complained; we said to God, “if you are God, where is our water?” The Tempter took Jesus to perch on top of the Temple and says, “Don’t you still wish for a God who will never let you suffer?” Jesus remembers that God made Moses strike a rock and water flowed freely—even in the desert; and that God may be inscrutable, but God is true to God’s promises. “I will not,” Jesus says to the Tempter, “test God.”

Then they both remember in that same desolate wilderness that Moses went up the mountain to talk with God and he took so long to come back that we melted down our gold and made a calf and danced around it and we begged another god to care for us. The Tempter remembers how quickly and easily we went off looking for a god with a better offer. The Tempter says to Jesus from the top of the mountain, “Look, there’s another god who can get you exactly what you want.” Jesus remembers all that God has been for us, all that God has done, that God is merciful and good and just and God’s love never fails and he looks at the Tempter and says, “God is enough.”

These are Jesus’ tests. But they are not only Jesus’.

I don’t know how you feel the presence of temptation in your life. I assume that all of us are subject to them. The traditional temptations are food, technology, sex, money.

But this story says something about temptation that is worth remembering. Temptations are not really about our biology. They’re not about having the willpower to say no to sugar or the rush of a social media feed. Temptation is question of identity. Your identity—the story of you that announces who you are to yourself and to others. Your identity—the fluid, yet stable sense of the self-in-the-world that moves as “you” through space and time as a coherence. When you are tempted, you are asked to be something—someone—other than who you are.

Which begs the question: who are you? Who is the you that is distinct from your urges and instincts? Who is the you that keeps its calm center when the world draws you this way and that? Is your identity defined by your family? Is your identity your physical features? Your skin? Your hair? Your gender? Is it your class? Is it your community? Who are you? When you wander out into your own wilderness, to the place you are alone, and there are no markers around to signify who you are and what your life is for... who are you then?

Only you can answer for you. For many of us, finding out who we are is a life-long journey, one with missteps and wrong turns. But also, perhaps, a journey that is full of grace. Perhaps, you, like Jesus, have deep memories about where you come from—about belonging to a people with

a history and a purpose. Maybe you, like Jesus, can recall a specific moment when you knew exactly who you are and you knew the shape and purpose of your life. Maybe you're still in process... your identity is still in formation. Maybe you're going through your own trial in the wilderness right now.

Let me offer one thing I know about you. You are the Beloved of God. You are created by God. You are nurtured every day by God's provision. You are made by love for love.

Before Jesus knows anything about what his life will entail Jesus knows who he is. He knows he is God's Beloved Child. So, Beloveds... so are you.