

Sermon, January 9, 2022

Matthew 4:1-11

“The Temptations of Jesus”

In this morning’s reading we find Jesus being led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. The wilderness serves as a metaphor, both in the Bible, and in other forms of literature, for example, in ‘The Wizard of Oz’ and ‘The Lord of the Rings’. It can be representative of a place of foreboding, a place to be lost, and, as we see in Matthew, a place for being tested. In fact, in Matthew we find many parallels between his gospel and the Old Testament. In this case, the Israelites forty years in the wilderness, and Jesus’ forty days and nights also in the wilderness. Again, for both, it is a time of testing.

Fulton J. Sheen wrote in his “Life of Jesus”, “It is through temptation and its strain that the depths of character are revealed.” As it is written in the Book of James, “Blessed is he who endures under trials. When he has proved his worth, he will win the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.” Likewise, we can say that temptation is not only a test of character, but, certainly, a test of faith.

The first temptation that Jesus faces, again, has an immediate parallel with the Israelites journey out of Egypt. Their first temptation, after having entered the wilderness, had to do with food. In the 16th chapter of Exodus, they complain to Moses and Aaron, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into the wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” It was then that the Lord provided manna from heaven. Jesus was not only in the wilderness, but he was also fasting, therefore Satan, whom Matthew referred to as the tempter, naturally used food as the first temptation. Jesus replied by referring back to Moses’ response to the Israelites in the 8th chapter of Deuteronomy, “He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna with which neither you or your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

Seeing that Jesus is not going to give in to the first temptation Satan then leads Jesus to a high place, and gets a little sneaky, by quoting from the 91st Psalm, which reads, “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” And, again, Jesus responds by quoting from the 6th chapter of Deuteronomy, saying, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test...”

Frustrated, once again, Satan takes Jesus to another high place and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said that Jesus could have all of these if he would just fall down and worship him. Remember that Satan is described as a fallen angel who rebelled against God, but whom God allows him to have some temporary power over the fallen world. This explains why Satan believes that all the kingdoms of the earth are within his right to give. But once more Jesus shoots back, this time from the 6th chapter of Deuteronomy, saying, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.” With this final rebuke Satan leaves, and angels come to serve Jesus.

The name Satan comes from a Hebrew word meaning, 'accuser' or 'adversary'. In the first two temptations he says, "If you are the Son of God...", i.e., in the form of a question, although some scholars interpret it as "*Since* you are the Son of God...", a more direct admission of who Jesus is. And so, the accuser is demanding that Jesus affirm his status before God. In a sense, we too, as God's adopted sons and daughters, may find ourselves put to the test, not necessarily through divine initiative, but through the various temptations that arise naturally in life - temptations that can, again, be our own rebellion against the will of God.

Temptation is something we all face in the course of life. As Oscar Wilde once famously put it, "I can resist everything except temptation." And temptation can arise in many different forms, from something as simple as wanting that extra piece of cake which we know we should not have, to more insidious desires. That extra piece of cake may not be quite the same as the desire for bread facing both the Israelites and Jesus, but it can also come in the form of desires for material goods that we want, but don't necessarily need.

Many desires and temptations, such as the extra piece of cake are not going to fall under the category of rebellion against God, but Jesus' second and third temptation can be more problematic. For example, there are those who say, 'I am not going to wear a mask, or be vaccinated, because the Lord will take care of me'. That is an obvious case of putting the Lord to the test. The third temptation can face us in terms of a desire for wealth and power, although wealth and power are not evil in themselves. It depends on how they are used. To use wealth and power as a means to inflict one's own desires upon others, especially in the form of control is not good, but to use it as means to help others and for the betterment of the common good is acceptable.

We all find ourselves faced with temptations from time to time. We all have our own times in the wilderness. Times when we feel lost. Times when we feel alone. Times when we sense our faith is put to the test. It's all just a part of being human. In the Lord's Prayer we ask, "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil". I've never quite understood the first part of that. Is it God who leads us into temptation, or is it the one Matthew calls the tempter? But however, it is that we find ourselves facing temptation, regardless of whether the temptation is evil or not, we can always turn to the Lord to help us find the strength to overcome. And, if we do give in to such a desire, and feel remorseful afterwards, we can, again, turn to a Lord who is merciful and forgiving. Amen.

Let us pray: Eternal Lord, God of grace and mercy, we offer our praise and worship and extend our gratitude for the blessings in this life. We thank you for the gift of you Son, Jesus, and seek your help in following in his ways. We are also grateful for the presence of your Holy Spirit here with us today. May your Spirit lift us and inspire us today and every day, as we face the many challenges life sets before us. We especially seek your help and guidance when we are faced with temptations that are displeasing to you, and no good for us. May we follow Jesus' example that he set in the wilderness.

Following your Son's example, we pray for all who are troubled, all who feel alone, all who are marginalized and discriminated against. We pray for peace and justice, and we pray for the sick and dying. May they all be aware of your loving presence as comforter and healer. Amen.