



Rev. Chris Taylor - 03.01.2020
"Temptation - A Walk with Jesus Series"
Matthew 4:1-11

With Ash Wednesday a few days ago we moved into Lent. In the early church this was a time of final preparation for catechumens; those who were preparing to join the Church through the sacrament of baptism on Easter. Over the years, however, this season evolved to include the whole community – both new and long-term Christians – who used this time to prepare for Holy Week and Easter.

We talk about the forty days of Lent, but if you actually counted them you would find there are forty six. That's because there are six Sundays during Lent, and we don't include them as part of the discipline and self-restraint of Lent because for us the Lord's Day is always a feast.

So that leaves us with forty, and that number is an important one for us. It is grounded in Scripture. Noah and his family spent forty days on the ark during the great flood. Moses was on Mt. Sinai for forty days and forty nights in his encounter with the living God. The Hebrew people wandered for forty years in the wilderness. Elijah took forty days on his journey to Horeb, and Jonah warned Ninevah that it had just forty days to repent. Most importantly, there are the forty days that Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness, and it is those forty that we specifically recall in our observance of Lent

Like Jesus in the wilderness, then, we approach this as season of preparation, and like Jesus, we often include some element of fasting – a "giving up" – that serves as a constant reminder of Jesus great sacrifice upon the cross. At its best, this is a time of self-examination; a time to consciously strive to become more Christ-like in thought and deed. The purpose of Lent, then, (the goal) is transformation: the hope that by opening our lives more and more to God's Spirit that we might conform more and more to the very image of Christ himself.

It is my hope that we might use these coming weeks to walk with Jesus as he moves towards the cross, and consider some of the struggles that he encountered over the course of his life and ministry. I believe those encounters can inform and enhance our understanding of the faith, and our understanding of what it means to be his follower.

What we are going to find is that Jesus' struggles are much like our own. Though he was the very Son of God, he had to deal with some of the same things we do: misunderstanding,

blindness, darkness, emptiness and temptation. These things didn't come Jesus' way because he had made some terrible mistake. No, they came to him for the same reason they come to us – they are a part of life; a part of what it means to live in this broken world. The question, then, isn't whether they will come. The question, rather, is how you and I will choose to respond.

This morning we begin with Jesus' temptation. He wasn't in the wilderness by accident. Scripture tells us that it was the Spirit that led him there. From that we can only conclude that there was something that Jesus needed there as he prepared for his ministry; something that only the wilderness and these temptations could teach him. Make no mistake, this was a struggle for him. These temptations were real. They had their draw, but it was as he wrestled with them that his own call became clearer; as he wrestled that he came to understand that he wasn't going to achieve God's ends by miracle or power, but that his call, rather, was to a life of service and self-sacrifice and love.

The first thing we should note is that Jesus was particularly vulnerable when the temptations came. He had been in the wilderness, exposed to the elements and fasting for forty days. As a result, he would have felt depleted; physically, emotionally and even spiritually spent. That, in turn, would have made him particularly open to what the tempter presented.

Alcoholics Anonymous has an acronym for those times when we are most vulnerable: HALT. Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired. Feel any of those things and we are going to be more susceptible to temptation. Feel a number of them, and the temptation might well feel overwhelming. When temptation comes, then, we should back a bit and consider our circumstances. We should ask ourselves if any of those four elements apply. If they do, we should do what we can to address them.

One of the most effective weapons against temptation is the one thing Jesus didn't have in the wilderness: other people to whom we can turn. The people around you this morning are one of God's great gifts. It is certainly true that other Christians can sometimes drive us crazy. I get that. But the truth is that the community of faith can also be a source of incredible comfort and encouragement and strength. But that doesn't happen by accident. Just showing up isn't going to get us there. No, we need to be intentional about creating this kind of community. We have to do those things that will help these relationships grow.

I meet so many people who long for community, but then aren't willing to do what it takes to help make that happen. You have to **make the time** to become part of a small group; or **make the time** to get involved with a ministry; or **make the time** to show up at a study week after week and build those relationships that are so important to our journey.

From the wilderness experience forward Jesus had that kind of community. In fact, we seem his reach out and form it just a few verses after our text. He had his three – James, Peter and John; and he had his twelve. Do we? Do we have people in our lives, more than just our spouse, with whom we are meeting on a regular basis? People who are in a position to know

what's going on in our lives; people who will call to check in during the tough times; people who can pray very specifically for us? If we don't, then perhaps we can use this season of Lent to identify them and begin to pull them together.

If the first thing to note was Jesus' vulnerability, the second is the form that his temptations took: assuage your hunger; establish your authority; take hold of power to impose your will on others. With each, the tempter quoted Scripture, and with each he offered something that on the surface would seem altogether reasonable and right.

What could be wrong with feeding the hungry, or establishing his authority, or bringing God's justice to a hurting world? Over the course of his ministry Jesus actually did all three: he multiplied the bread and fish to feed the five thousand; he performed miracles as evidence of God's presence and favor; and of course, he ultimately fulfilled God's purposes in his movement to the cross.

Pleasure is good. Success is good. Justice is good. There is nothing wrong with any of these things which is exactly what made them so tempting. That's what the tempter does: takes something good and makes it bigger; takes something right and then offers the wrong way to get there. It is when we start thinking that the end justifies the means that we get in trouble. It is when the good becomes our god, our goal, that temptation starts wreaking havoc.

The temptation for Jesus was to use his power to assert his will; to get things done his way and in his time. But that's not God's way. That's not the way God moves in this world. God has all the power we could ever imagine, but God never uses that power to impose His will on others. So for Jesus, the end – the goal – was good. It was the way the tempter wanted him to get there that was the issue.

Whenever you start thinking the end justifies the means remember Jesus' temptation. It is precisely that kind of thinking that Jesus was rejecting. The means matter. The means say every bit as much about who we are and whose we are as the ends we seek to serve. God never condones evil. God will never say it is okay to do something wrong even when the end appears good and pure and true.

Jesus came for something so much greater than simply feeding the hungry. His ministry was about something so much more important than establishing his authority. And his purpose, finally, was about something so much more beautiful than imposing justice on this wayward world. As worthy as all those things might have been, Jesus came for something greater. Jesus came to offer life. He came to bring the very Kingdom of God into this world. He came that we might be forgiven and so enter into that relationship with our Creator that changes everything.

Jesus' message to us this morning is this: temptation comes to all and it will always come in a form that appears winsome and attractive and even good. But don't embrace temptation's good in place of something infinitely better. Choose God's best, and choose (as Jesus did) God's way of getting there.