

“The Face of Temptation”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 4:1-17
January 20, 2019
Beloved Community Sunday

In order to put this morning’s Gospel Lesson into its proper context, it’s crucial to back up and start with the last few verses from last week’s reading, which was the story of Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan. Listen for the good news of Jesus Christ in the Gospel according to Matthew, starting at the end of chapter 3:

...when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But [Jesus] answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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.’” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

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

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Jesus is not lost, not being punished, not looking for some time off the grid. It is the same Spirit that descended down by the riverside that brings him out to the wilderness in order for him to have a run-in with temptation. As hearers of Matthew’s Gospel, we’ve gotten a holy lineage and messages from

angels and a visit from magi and the preaching of John the Baptist that all indicate fulfillment of prophecies and then a voice from heaven and *everything* is pointing to Jesus being the Son of God.¹ But that title is owned by Caesar in Rome, so as hearers of this Gospel we let the Tempter say what might be on our minds: “Let’s find out if it’s true.” Before Jesus starts his earthly ministry of preaching and teaching and healing, we get a test of the identity that has been asserted so strongly.

The test happens after forty days and forty nights in the wilderness.

Forty days and nights — Noah and his family and the animals endured the flood.

Forty days and nights — Moses fasted on Mount Sinai as he received the Law.

Forty days and nights — Elijah fasted in the desert awaiting a new direction from God.

Forty years — the Israelites wandered on their way to the Promised Land.

You linger in the wilderness and prepare and are educated in mercy and trust and you wait for what God will do next.²

It won’t be until the fourteenth chapter of Matthew that the disciples will call Jesus “Son of God.” That will happen when Jesus walks on water and Peter steps out and then starts to sink and Jesus ends up in the boat with them and the wind calms. But between God claiming him as “my Son, the Beloved” at the river and the disciples saying it on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus will be called “Son of God” only by demons³ and devils.

Three temptations:

feed your hungry self by turning stones to bread,

call on your status as God’s Son to prove your worth to this devil,

grasp power by abandoning God.

And Jesus resists all three, of course. He resists with scripture, even as the Tempter uses scripture against him. He does not need to prove anything to these diabolical suggestions. He does not want security that comes out of false scarcity. He does not have interest in authority that is not anyone’s to give but God’s. Jesus rejects each temptation and plants firmly his identity, future, and purpose in the one who calls him “beloved.”

I never know quite what to make of this devil-Satan-tempter character. The Bible doesn’t paint nearly as clear a picture of a physical manifestation of evil as Dante and Milton and pop culture do. I’m reminded of a dear pastor friend who, when asked at his examination for ordination if he believed in the devil, replied, “No, I believe in Jesus Christ!” If you get nothing else out of this wilderness temptation story, hearer of Matthew’s Gospel, let it be this: This is the Son of God. Trust him. He will not lead you astray.

We are celebrating Beloved Community Sunday because tomorrow is our nation’s day to honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King preached about a vision of the Beloved Community, a phrase he did not coin, but one that captured his imagination. It was a global vision in which poverty would not be tolerated, bigotry would be rejected, and violence would be put aside in favor of a spirit of equality and nonviolence and justice.

¹ Audrey West at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3174

² Audrey West

³ Matthew 8:29

How much temptation must have been resisted in nonviolent pursuit of the Beloved Community. When the gang is waiting for the bus of Freedom Riders as it pulls in, when the bomb crashes through the window, when — just a few miles from this pulpit — the police turn their dogs and firehoses loose on your children — the temptation to return evil for evil must have been strong as the smell of fresh-baked bread to people who were hungry for justice. But “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God,” and so there was a voice louder than the voice of the Tempter.

Temptations persist today.

And the first temptation is to act as if there are no temptations left in regards to race. Of course, this temptation is only available to some of us. When our nation elected a black president and inaugurated him ten years ago today, some posited that we’d move into a post-racial America. It would be simple to refute that by pointing to statistics about black Americans being arrested more often and receiving harsher sentences for the same crimes as white Americans. Or we could talk about the boldness with which neo-Nazi and white nationalists have spoken in the past two years. Or we could simply read quotes from United States Representative Steve King of Iowa who is “basically an open white nationalist at this point.”⁴ (By the way, that quote comes not from MSNBC, or the Washington Post, but from the founder of the Daily Stormer, a neo-Nazi/Holocaust-denying website.)

That kind of blatant racism is easy to see, and to then immediately mark as being unacceptable. If we would just get rid of Steve King and his friends in the white hoods, we’d be where we need to be. But Steve King is not a fringe character, but a man in the upper crust of American power. And I can tell you from personal experience that no verifiable crime statistics will convince a large chunk of my white family that there is any sort of bias. The temptation to put these kinds of problems out of our minds is strong. *Everything is fine. These problems are the imagination of the overly-sensitive. Life looks pretty good for me. If they would just...* And the tempter has won. If we cannot hear fellow humans suffering and respond with, at the very least, curiosity about their suffering, we have failed in our calling as children of God.

In his *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, Dr. King wrote: “I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

We cannot turn stones to bread, but we can hear the Tempter say, “You’re hungry, aren’t you?” Jesus found abundance in the word of God. Meanwhile, I have never fasted for forty days, yet I am deeply concerned that there won’t be a doughnut left after all the hands are shaken, even though I know with certainty that Ben Klimko would tackle a fourth-grader if it meant protecting the last one for me. A rich old miser is funny to us in movies and books — someone who has so much, and yet fears losing even a little bit. And here we sit in a nation of vast size and wealth, so very fearful of sharing with humans whose only difference from us is the roulette wheel of geographic birth.

I presume none of us can relate to being brought atop a temple and feeling tempted to jump just to give God’s angels a workout. We do, however, have before us the temptation to rely on our status, our privilege, our special position. You can cut that a thousand ways. For me: I’m white. I’m a man. I’m straight. The way I experience and express my gender doesn’t upset anybody, mostly. I’ve had the opportunity to get a graduate degree and I am married to someone who makes more money than I do.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/10/us/politics/steve-king-trump-immigration-wall.html>

I'm a Christian. I'm an American citizen. None of that means life has been easy or free of struggle. But I have had a ton of advantages, most of which I did not earn. Whatever lottery ticket we were given at birth, the Tempter wants us see it is a reflection of our worthiness to receive God's care. If we are born to struggle, the voice says, "This is who you are." If we are born to great fortune, the voice says, "This is who you are."

The only person I know of besides Jesus who was offered money and power and anything he asked for was the Spaniard Inigo Montoya in the film *The Princess Bride*, and that wasn't an offer from the devil, but from a six-fingered man who Montoya had at the end of his sword. As we prepared to baptize Levi last Sunday, we heard the words at the end of Matthew that the risen Christ says to his disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." What the Tempter offered wasn't his to give. Jesus is given such authority because he is God's Son and what that identity has led him to do in life and death and resurrection.

A deal with the devil is always unwise, but claiming power and property requires more than giving in to hunger or testing God. It requires changing the direction of worship from God to something else.

This week Gillette — you know, the razor people — got a bunch of blowback for their new ad taking on the concept of toxic masculinity. They had the gall to suggest that perhaps men could speak up when a woman is being harassed or step in when a kid is being bullied. Real cutting-edge, controversial stuff.

Then on Friday, a group of teenage boys from a private parochial school in Kentucky, visiting Washington, D.C. for a Pro-Life march, had a run-in with a Native American Vietnam veteran by the name of Nathan Phillips as he drummed and sang with other folks from the Indigenous Peoples March and a group of men from a group called the Black Hebrew Israelites. The whole situation was a mess. It's clear that we can do better in talking about the temptations of race and testosterone-drenched bullying.⁵

Dr. King wrote in that letter from Birmingham: "...the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?"

Given the name "Beloved" and the identity "children of God," will we resist the temptations of injustice, or will we turn away from God?

Mid-crucifixion, the crowd taunts Jesus, repeating the Tempter's words: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." Christ remains faithful and trusting to the end, when a centurion proclaims, "Truly this man was God's Son!"⁶

Of course, the end was not the end. This story is not defined by what people call the Beloved or what the Tempter offers. This story is defined by the care and the audaciousness and the abundance and the power and the authority of the One who has far more to offer us in a cup of promise and the bread that is life. Amen.

⁵ This paragraph was edited after the sermon was delivered to correct the account of the run-in after new information came to light.

⁶ Matthew 27:40; 27:54