

Sermon for I Lent, Year A
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St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Arlington, VA
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“Temptations in the Wilderness”

Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSV)

At his baptism Jesus hears words of assurance: “Thou art my beloved Son.” He hears the same words at his Transfiguration, the gospel story we heard last Sunday. “You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased.” These words of comfort and blessing are words that each of us longs to hear at the innermost part of our being. “You are my beloved son or daughter. With you I am well pleased.”

When I served as a full-time hospital chaplain right after my graduation from seminary, one of the chaplains under whom I trained, used to say that each of us spends a good part of our life just waiting to be told that we are “ok”—that we are loved just as we are. Each of us is just waiting to be “blessed.” Some never find that blessing even from the persons they love most dearly. That is what God tells Jesus at his baptism. And that is what God wants to tell each of you: “You have my blessing; you are my beloved.”

The words of assurance which Jesus hears at his baptism empower him for the prophetic ministry on which he is about to embark, a ministry he seems to realize almost from the beginning will lead him to conflict with the authorities and to his execution.

Hearing words of comfort and assurance, Jesus is led, as the gospel tells us, “by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” The Greek word for “wilderness,” meaning a lonely or solitary place, is *hermeia*. It is the same word from which we derive the English word “hermit.” This time apart helps Jesus to prepare for his public ministry and for the conflicts and trials that will ensue when it begins.

In his forty days of solitary time, Jesus wrestled with his identity and his messianic mission. How was he to be faithful to God? What was he to do? And how was he going to do it? Here the devil, the “adversary” is eager to give Jesus advice. To make sense of the story of Jesus, we first have to understand the backdrop of this story within the history of God’s chosen people, Israel.

The Bible tells the story of how God wants to form a people whom God can love and care for—a people who will love and serve God alone. It seems to be the nature of God's people, however, to murmur and complain, even against God. The people of the church, Matthew is keenly aware, are no different in that regard from

the people of Israel. We too in our murmuring and complaining fail to trust in the goodness of God's care for us.

After their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, we might expect the ancient Israelites to be full of joy. In the wilderness, however, far from the settled lives they lived in Egypt, they experienced only frustration and anger at their lack of bodily comforts. They began to lament: "If only we had died in Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread." Now all we do is go hungry. To stop their complaining, God showered *manna*, a hitherto unknown substance. (Manna means "what is it" in Hebrew.) The gift of this heavenly food is not enough to quell the peoples' anger and frustration. They complain further, "Give us water to drink." Moses asked the people, "why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" Moses begged God to do something to placate the people; "They are about to stone me," he said. God tells Moses to strike the rock with his staff and water will come forth out of the rocks. Moses did as the Lord commanded and the water flowed. In spite of the miracle, the people are still unhappy. A bit embarrassed by his own peoples' lack of faith, Moses named the place "Meribah and Massah" because there the Israelites quarreled (Meribah) and tested (Massah) the Lord (Exodus 17:7).

Psalm 95, which we often sing as a canticle during Morning Prayer (the Venite), begins with the familiar words: "O Come let us sing unto the Lord...For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture." The psalm continues with words with which you may not be as familiar: "Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah on that day at Massah in the wilderness when your ancestors put me to proof, though they had seen my work. Forty years long I detested that generation...."

The Old Testament tells the people of Israel's own story of the difficulties they faced in being faithful to the God who called them to be his chosen people. They found it more difficult than they had imagined to follow the first of the commandments God gave to Moses.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (Exodus 20:2-4).

Moses had barely gotten down from the mountain when he discovered the golden calf they had made and were worshipping.

The story of the temptation of Jesus is a theological *midrash*, a theological commentary, on the story of the complaining and testing of God by the ancient Israelites and with their lack of faithfulness to the covenant they had made with God. Where the Israelites tested God for forty years in the wilderness, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness refusing to give into the temptation to put God to the test. Jesus was faithful where the Israelites had not been. Jesus refused to yield to

the devil in three areas of human weakness.

1. After 40 days of fasting, Jesus was hungry and thirsty. The temptation was for Jesus to use his messianic power to turn stones into bread rather than trust God to provide for him. His temptation was to gratify his sensual appetites. Where Israel in their hunger and thirst in the wilderness had tested God to show whether and how well God would provide for him, Jesus refuses to resort to the abuse of his messianic power, to make food to eat. We should notice here that the adversary subtly tries to shake Jesus' confidence by first raising the slightest doubt about his identity: "**If** you are the Son of God" and then appealing to his vanity to prove it then and there. The first temptation Jesus rejected was an appeal to his sensual appetites.
2. The adversary next quoting scripture like a pro, reminds Jesus of his self-importance as the so-called "Son of God." "**If** you are the Son of God, then see if God will save you as promised in Psalm 91, if you throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple. Jesus refuses citing Scripture; he refuses to put God to the test. In refusing to test God, the second temptation that Jesus rejected was self-aggrandizement, that is, trying to focus God's (and other people's) attention on himself so that he can feel good about himself and know for sure that God really loves him.
3. The adversary finally gets down to business. "If you will fall down and worship me"... "I will give you all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor." Where the Israelites slipped time and time again into idolatry, Jesus refuses to worship a false god. Jesus' rejection of the third temptation was a rejection of the power that comes only at the expense of worshipping the true God, his beloved. The adversary is also asking Jesus to compromise just a bit on his principles. If you compromise, cut corners just a bit, people will come flocking to be around you.

Where Adam and Eve failed in the Garden of Eden and where the Israelites put God to the test, the responses Jesus gives to his adversary Satan makes him the new Adam and a model of the faithful Israel. (St. Paul reminds us of this fact today's epistle from the fifth chapter of Romans.)

In some ways the temptations Jesus faced were unique to him. After all, he is the Messiah and we are not. Perhaps his temptations to sensual appetites, self-aggrandizement, and power were greater in scale than our own temptations. Whether that is so is impossible to answer; the temptations Jesus faced are nonetheless the same ones that face us each and every day.

We all face the temptations to gratify ourselves at the expense of others. We face the temptation to seek first to please our sensual appetites. We face the temptation to exaggerate our own importance both to others and to ourselves, and we face the temptation to gain power over others—even if we have to hurt others to get what we want.

In the prayer our Savior taught us we say, "lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil." When you pray these words, what do they mean to you? If

Jesus is our example, there are two types of temptations we must avoid: those that lead us to forget God and fail to trust in His mercy and love and that lead us to focus on what we desire, even at the expense of others.

I wonder if we give into these same temptations out of a desire to bless ourselves? Lacking trust in the God who loves us and calls us to ministry, we strive to bless ourselves, finding comfort in self-gratification, self-aggrandizement, and a desire for power over others.

We are constantly to give in to temptation—to sell out and take the easy path. Jesus does not give in to temptation. In the only other public rebuke to “Satan” in the New Testament, Jesus rebukes Peter and calls him “Satan” when Peter suggests that Jesus should avoid the path that will lead him to the cross. “Get behind me Satan, you are on the side of people and not of God.” Jesus knows that there are no corners to be cut when it comes to being faithful to the God who has called him and blessed him.

Hear these words of comfort and blessing, the words you long to hear at the innermost part of your being. “You are my beloved son or daughter. With you I am well pleased.”