

Sunday – March 13, 2011  
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook  
Sermon – **Temptation**

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### **Matthew 4:1-11**

Right after Jesus' baptism, when the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove, he is "led up by the Spirit" into the desert "to be tempted by the devil." In Mark, it says "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." (1:12) See the transformation from dove to slave-driver.

Notice that the purpose of this trip to the desert was to allow the devil to tempt him. It is not a coincidence that the devil shows up. That is why Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days and nights.

For Matthew, this is just the beginning of Jesus' conflict with the kingdom of the world. This conflict continued throughout his ministry, as he faced the religious leaders who had collaborated with the worldly powers to their own gain. This is a conflict between two kingdoms, two empires. And this conflict is at the heart of the Gospel of Matthew.

The Greek word for "test/tempt" (peirazo) is used in Matthew only in reference to Satan and to the religious leaders in their dealings with Jesus. And, Jesus resists both Satan and the chief priests, elders, scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees by quoting scripture.

In the middle of this action and this sub-text, let's keep in mind that everything we see Jesus doing, he is doing in obedience to his Father. He came to the Jordan to be baptized and is led into the desert to be tempted. He does these because he is obedient.

There are some parallels with Moses here. Moses spent 40 days and nights on Mt. Sinai when he received the Ten Commandments, He fasted up there for those 40 days/nights. He led the Hebrew slaves through water (baptism) and the desert (temptations). They were tested and failed because they were disobedient. They lacked faith in the God who had brought them out of Egypt and slavery. They were worshiping other gods. Remember the golden calf? But, Jesus passes through the water of baptism and enters the desert and remains obedient to God, refusing to worship Satan.

Jesus does not meet the devil until after he had fasted for 40 days. He is weak with hunger. This an important detail, because it establishes his humanity before the conflict begins. The point is, Jesus Christ was fully human and fully divine. That means that the temptations were real for him. He IS tempted. They don't just bounce off. He must resist them, just like we do.

The devil begins his temptation with “*If* you are the Son of God...” The commentary I was reading to prepare this sermon said that wasn't a ploy to throw doubt on Jesus' divinity. The “if” could as well be translated as “since.” The devil is not questioning whether or not Jesus is the Son of God, but this whole episode is about seeing what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God. Think about it. Being the Son of God could mean a thousand different things. These temptations bring to focus what being the Son of God means for Jesus of Nazareth.

“Loaves of bread,” meaning more than Jesus needed to eat right then and there, would have been able to feed his hungry brothers and sister who had no bread at all. This would be a good thing to do. It would not only help those poor people, it would make Jesus extremely popular. It would be a good political move.

And it's not as though Jesus would never feed hungry people miraculously. Every gospel has an account of Jesus multiplying loaves and fish to feed thousands of people. So, turning stones into bread is not, in and of itself, a bad thing to do. But, when Jesus feeds people, he does it to glorify God, not Satan. So, Jesus rejects Satan's suggestion, and replies by quoting Deuteronomy 4:2.

The second temptation in Matthew (the order is different in Luke), is for Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple so everyone could watch as the angels caught him and brought him safely to earth. In making this suggestion, Satan has caught on, and quotes Psalm 91. The very important lesson to learn here is that **anyone** can quote the Bible to support **any** idea. Beware the evil use of scripture to support things that are not in any way God's will.

Just as in the miraculous production of food, getting help from angels is not an inherently bad thing, either. Angels protected Jesus in Matthew 2, when Joseph heard from an angel that he needed to pack up the family and flee to Egypt. And, of course, angels will come and minister to Jesus at the end of this story.

And the leap from the pinnacle would have been a very spectacular proof of Jesus' divinity. But, Jesus rejects this temptation by quoting Deut. 6:16. And, as with the first temptation, Jesus was not above showing off with miracles later. He walked on water, he fed the multitudes, he paid taxes by pulling a coin out of a fish's mouth. But, the question is, and it always is, about who you are serving, whether you are doing miracles or simply good deeds.

Then, the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. In Luke's version, the devil says, "for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please." So, the devil is claiming to own the world. To which I reply, "The devil is the Father of Lies. Are you going to believe **anything** he tells you?" The world belongs to God, who gives it to Christ, as the Risen Christ tells his disciples in Matthew 28:18 - "All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me."

But, the temptation is for Jesus to rule the world the way a political leader would rule. He could have done tremendous good in the world, but it would have been by the world's rules, not by God's. Essentially, the offer is to be the Emperor of Rome. Jesus was never interested in this. He wanted God's rule in the world. He comes proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand, and in the Lord's Prayer, he asks for God's kingdom to come.

Then, when the devil leaves, angels come and attend to Jesus. He refused to make his own food out of rocks, and he refused to demand help from angels by leaping from the pinnacle of the Temple. But, he gets both food and angelic help. It's just as he says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33)

Each temptation was to do something that was essentially good: feed the hungry, draw people to him, rule the world with righteousness and mercy. Any one of these things could have been supported by tradition and scripture. But, such is the nature of temptation. It has to seem like a very good idea at the time.

Bread and circuses and political power were at the heart of the Roman Empire, and at the heart of every other kingdom and empire in human history. Jesus is proving that kingdom/empire can be based on something completely different: obedience to God, summed up in loving God, loving one's neighbor as one's self, and loving one's enemy. The citizens of the

kingdom of God have a loving relationship with God, and they don't demand miraculous exceptions to the limitations of an authentic human life. They seek simply to understand and do God's will, to make decisions that can be justified before God's throne, to stave off temptation by holding fast to the hand of Jesus Christ, who came to save us while we were yet sinners.