

## An Overcomer of Temptation

### Matthew 4:1-11

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." <sup>4</sup> But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> 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.' "

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup> and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Thank you for allowing Leroy and me to go on vacation! Thank you to Rev. Graves for filling the pulpit for the last two Sundays. Thank you for your prayers! As you know we had the vacation from both heaven and hell. What I know is that God did indeed provide! We know of the wonderful health facilities on the Carnival cruise line. But what I know is that God did indeed provide! We know of the care at the hospital in St. Thomas. But what I know is that God did indeed provide! We know of the hotel on the bay in St. Thomas. But what I know is that God did indeed provide! We know you have to fly to Miami to get to Barbados from St. Thomas. But what I know is that God did indeed provide! We know there are wonderful resorts in Barbados. But what I know is that God did indeed provide! We know that Carnival has a wonderful care team to assist if you have to get off the ship! But what I know is that God did indeed provide! We know you

need a good travel agent looking out for you when you are in a foreign county. And what I know is that God did indeed provide! Again we thank you for your prayers.

Our scripture today is about overcoming temptation. Commentator Douglas Hall says: We miss the point when we consider this text only from the perspective of its characterization of Jesus and his mission. It is also a statement about the church. Jesus, not without difficulty, resisted these temptations; the church and we as members, however, have rarely been able to do so. Indeed too often and characteristically we, the church, have succumbed—to the point of acting as though the devil's proposals were entirely compatible with our Founder's divine commission (Matt. 28:19-20).

Hall says: there are not really three temptations, but three variations on the same basic theme. The devil has a one-track mind. As from the beginning, he tempts his victims to go for *power* ("you will be like God" [Gen. 3:5]). Evidently he knows there is no surer path to internal contradiction and self-destruction.

***The First Variation is the Temptation to Attempt the Miraculous.*** The first temptation is about setting aside the laws of nature and experience and, by an open display of divine omnipotence—one in which stones may with a flourish be turned into bread, and so forth. That is to say, it is an attempt to displace the quintessentially Hebraic commitment to *creation* (which is "very good," limits and all) with a redemption theology that gives us "the kingdom" without "the cross." It is a temptation to work miracle, not in the sense in which Jesus allowed himself sometimes to defy fate in the name of divine compassion, but in the sense of seeking the world's salvation by offering *another world*—or seeming to, trying to—and thereby encouraging believers to abandon or despise and maltreat the one we actually have.

Historic Christianity abounds in that attempt—when it parades alleged miracles as proof of religious authenticity; more subtly when we accentuate the "already" and neglect the "not yet," when we share Easter without Good Friday; when we tell people that the Christian life will take away all their problems and don't encourage the faith required for living with life's paradoxes.

***The Second Variation is the Temptation to Spectacle.*** Our world is athirst for spectacle and the conspicuously heroic, as was that of the first-century Christians. Maybe that is why we are fascinated by the Marvel Comic super heroes movies. Today, when most people feel invisible and unnecessary, lost among the 7.8 billion of the world population, the clever are able to turn this ancient longing into big business—the "cult of celebrity." *Our* heroes do not have to jump off towers; they have only to appear tantalizingly sexy. With all that media attention, the most blatant exhibitionism can seem irresistible to the voiceless and the plain.

The church has shown itself remarkably adept at exploring the possibilities of this temptation. Whether through cults of the saints, the exploitation of science-defying medical and other miracles, or the staging of huge media triumphs—above all by presenting Jesus himself as the ultimate celebrity—Christians have sought preeminence for ourselves and our own religion.

***The Third Variation is the Temptation to Political Power.*** Here the true character of all three temptations shows itself without ambiguity or nuance. Variations 1 and 2 contain some semblance of persuasion; the third goes directly for sheer control.

Only the unreflective can consider this temptation today without conjuring up the whole centuries-long Christendom experiment. As the term itself attests, Christendom was (and, where it still pertains, is) nothing more nor less than a quest for the ultimate domination (dom = dominion) of the Christian religion—*not of Christ*. There is still a difference! The pre-Constantinian church certainly knew

that quest as a *temptation*: the New Testament depicts the apostles themselves as falling into that assumption frequently. However, with the adoption of Christianity by imperial Rome, or what remained of it, the search for power through proximity to (and pressure upon) political power became the dominant *pattern* of Western Christianity, including most Protestantism, including Disciples of Christ.

Human beings—individually and corporately, institutionally—all know the pull of the quest for power. What could be more human? So it is not unusual that this temptation has also colored the history of the church, but at its most faithful and perceptive, the disciple community has never been without its witnesses to the impossibility of combining the gospel of divine love with a bid for power on the part of those who proclaim that gospel. Yes, we may speak of "the power of love"; but lovers know that love is the only *power* that assumes the utter vulnerability of the lover: "whenever I am weak, *then* I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

"We long," wrote Paul Tillich, "for a Christ of power. Yet if *He* were to come and transform us and our world, we should have to pay the one price which we could not pay: we would have to lose our freedom, our humanity, and our spiritual dignity. Maybe we would be happier, but we would also be lower beings, our present misery, struggle and despair notwithstanding.... Those who dream of a better life and try to avoid the Cross as a way, and those who hope for a Christ and attempt to exclude the Crucified have no knowledge of the mystery of God and humanity."

It is no surprise, then, that the Tempter's final attempt to capture the soul of Christ, "second Adam" as he did the first takes the form of a taunt shouted at Jesus as he hung "despised and rejected" on the cross of Golgotha, a taunt voiced by "those who passed by ... shaking their heads" (the same eternal Deceiver who whispered to Jesus in these earlier "variations on the theme"): "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matt. 27:40).

That one is still whispering his enticing suggestions to Christian people and the church today. **Douglas John Hall**

Today the deceiver still wants to create a generation of people who are defined by selfishness and insincerity, pettiness and pride, fear and a need to control the things of this world.

This is true of our own temptations. Most of us cannot imagine the devil offering bread after a forty-day fast. We do not know the fear of being held over the ledge at the top of the Empire State Building. We certainly do not know the temptation of being offered all the power in the world. Each one of us, however, understands the temptations of pride, vanity, selfishness, and apathy. These are just as dark as Jesus' temptations.

Temptation comes to us in moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough. Temptation comes in judgments we make about strangers or friends who make choices we do not understand. Temptation rules us, making us able to look away from those in need and to live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger, and disease. Temptation rages in moments when we allow our temper to define our lives or when addiction to wealth, power, influence over others, vanity, or an inordinate need for control defines who we are. Temptation wins when we engage in the justification of little lies, small sins: a racist joke, a questionable business practice for the greater good, a criticism of a spouse or partner when he or she is not around. Temptation wins when we get so caught up in the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself. These are the temptations that lurk in the recesses of our lives and our souls.

In our church year we have entered the season of Lent, when we are encouraged to engage the dark places in our lives that we may come face to face with them, name them, understand them, and seek forgiveness for them. It is not about guilt. It

is about freedom from the control that our fears and insecurities have over us all, about the amendment of life and new beginnings. **Maryetta Anschutz**

Clearly, temptation is inevitable for God's children and not to be avoided at all costs (cf. 18:7; 26:36-46; Heb. 12:6). Indeed, temptations of materialism, security, and prestige are not foreign to us. Whatever form temptation may take, it may be passed through by means of trust in God to provide what is needed (cf. Gen. 22:1-14). The "tester's" power is real, but it is limited. Like Jesus, believers, you and I, can trust in God's Word and saving power. Victory belongs to those who will follow Jesus through temptation (Heb. 2:14-18; 4:15-16). **Robert A. Bryant**

None of us is above temptation, but with every temptation God gives us a way out and Scripture to help us see the greater picture of God's love and God's plan for our growth and our good!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A,  
Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.