

Wilderness Temptations

Matthew 4:1-11

This is Matthew's account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Immediately after Jesus' baptism (3:13-17) the Holy Spirit led Jesus, the beloved Son, out into the wilderness to be severely tested. Here we learn that Christian living is not easy but involves conflict and struggle that will lay bare one's deepest passion and loyalty. Central to each of the challenges that Jesus faced is a single question: To what extent would he trust God to be God?

On this occasion the wilderness was not a place for recreation and renewal, but a place of struggle. The temptations Jesus faced came after fasting "forty days and forty nights" (cf. Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2) and enduring solitude. He arrived at this critical junction where his loyalty to God the Father was tested through his confrontation with the "devil."

Temptation occurred with God's allowance (cf. Exod. 16:4; Deut. 8:3; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Amos 3:5-6), and it revealed the essential character of the tested one. In the first confrontation, the "tester" encouraged Jesus to satisfy his physical hunger by turning stones into bread. The devil's statement did not reflect doubt about Jesus' identity or power; instead, it could be translated "Since you are the Son of God." The deceiver attempted to mislead Jesus into using his power for himself rather than trusting the Father to satisfy his need. Jesus saw through the deception and he refused. Quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus insisted that there was more at stake at the moment than food, as essential as food is (e.g., 25:34-40). Jesus would not misuse his power for personal material gain.

The second test focused on Jesus' vulnerability and need for safety. The devil invited Jesus to make himself secure from injury or even death. The devil quoted Scripture to prove that God agreed. Again Jesus was not deceived. The devil had used Scripture out of context; and it did not endorse testing God's protective grace for the sake of self-assurance. So Jesus rebutted the devil with a text of his own (Deut. 6:16) and applied it faithfully in its context. Jesus refused to misuse his power to make himself safe and secure.

The third temptation attempted to seduce Jesus with domination and prestige. The devil offered Jesus control over all of the world's kingdoms, along with their praise and glory, in exchange for his allegiance. Jesus was not led astray. He rejected the deceiver's misdirection and quoted Scripture again (Deut. 6:13) in its context, saying, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Jesus would not misuse his power to amass clout and esteem.

At that, Satan departed and divine messengers arrived to serve Jesus' needs. He came through each temptation through total reliance on God the Father. Jesus was and is God's Son, with whom God is well pleased (3:17).

Robert A. Bryant

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, however, has rarely been able to do so. Too often the church has given in easily—to the point of acting as though the devil's proposals were entirely compatible with its Founder's divine commission (Matt. 28:19-20).

For the church 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 remember when he told Eve "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 power—one in which stones may be turned into bread, and so forth. It is an attempt to displace the church's commitment to *creation* (which is "very good," limits and all) with a redemption 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*—and encouraging believers to abandon or despise and maltreat the one we actually have. It is the temptation to have Easter without Good Friday. The church must have the courage faith inspires for living with life's good and bad.

For the church 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. Today, when most of us feel invisible and unnecessary, lost among the billions, 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 (like Superman from our childhood); 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 we bring in super saints, or thousands who have been miraculously healed by prayer, or the staging of huge media crusades and presenting Jesus himself as the ultimate

celebrity—Christians have sought notoriety for ourselves and our own religion.

For the church the third variation is the temptation to political power. The church has given in to this temptation by whole centuries of conquering the world for the Christian religion—rather than for Christ. This temptation is for power through proximity to (and pressure upon) political power. Human beings—individually and corporately, institutionally—all know the pull of the quest for power. 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, one 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).

It is no surprise, then, that the tempter's final attempt to capture the soul of this "second Adam" as he did the first took 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": "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matt. 27:40).

The evil one is still whispering his enticing suggestions to the church today. **Douglas John Hall**

Individually, "the greatest trick the devil ever played was to make the world believe he doesn't exist." This is also the premise of the 1995 film *The Usual Suspects*, the story of five men wrongly interrogated for a crime, who punish the police by masterminding a caper. Payback leaves 27 dead, 91 million dollars worth of drug money missing, and two dark questions: Who is the mysterious Keyser Söze who put these crimes in motion, and what

kind of unnamed, sinister hold does he have over these five seemingly unconnected men?

The heart of darkness in this film was not the crime or death; darkness came from the fact that evil was unrecognizable—it had no face. Only at the very end of the film was Keyser Söze revealed to be one of the men who had pretended to fear Söze. Evil was lurking closer than the audience or the players ever knew.

There is something captivating about seeing evil incarnate on the big screen, in the pages of a novel, or in the names of those said by a nation to pose political threats. This is true in sacred texts. Evil tested Eve and Aaron, the great high priest, Job and King David, Jesus and his disciples. Over and over again, in order to live a life that chooses God, a faithful person must face the choice of acting outside of God.

At first glance, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness doesn't apply to us – after all, Jesus is the son of God and we know he will not submit. Jesus was tempted by bread for his hunger. He was tempted to save himself from danger. He was tempted to take all the power in the world that the devil offered. Much like the inevitability of the cross, the defeat of the devil in his encounter with Jesus was inevitable. Jesus would overcome.

In C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, the author wrote of a junior tempter-in-training named Wormwood and his mentor Uncle Screwtape. Young Wormwood's task was to darken the heart of his "patient," to train him to love things worldly and reject God, so that Wormwood may finally escort him into what we can only imagine is hell. The young apprentice was to keep his patient navel-gazing and self-involved, clueless about who he was.

Keep him spiritual and not practical, Screwtape advised, as it is the practical that often brings people to God. Encourage him to pray for tangible, desired ends and so direct his prayers to objects and not to God. Allow the patient to be oversensitive until everything, even his mother, grates on his nerves. Keep his prayers formless, as they are easier to manipulate. Turn his gaze away from God toward himself. Create a subtle conflict when he prays for courage; let him find himself turning boastful. In the final letter, the patient dies and goes to heaven, leaving Wormwood a failure and Screwtape in a spiral of anger.

The captivating part of the story is not that Screwtape and Wormwood are trying to create an army of ruthless killers; rather they are trying 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 Screwtape and Wormwood offer: pride, vanity, selfishness, and apathy. These are just as dark as Jesus' temptations, and perhaps even more so.

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 moments when evil lurks in the recesses of our lives and our souls.

During this season of Lent we look into 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**

As Jesus was tempted, it is inevitable for God's children to be tempted. 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, we can trust in God's Word and saving power. Victory belongs to us as we follow Jesus through temptation (Heb. 2:14-18; 4:15-16). **Robert A. Bryant**

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