

# “Tempted in the Wilderness”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 15, 2023*

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 91:9-16

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Matthew 4:1-17

It is no accident that Jesus winds up in the wilderness after his baptism. Matthew wants us to know what kind of Messiah Jesus is. And also what kind of Messiah Jesus isn't.

Jesus is not lost, and he is not being punished for something he has done wrong, which are assumptions that people today sometimes make about their own “wilderness experiences.” He has been led there by the Holy Spirit for a purpose: to be tempted or tested (the underlying Greek means both) by the devil. His confrontation with *Diabolos* functions as an assessment (or, perhaps, a proof) of his readiness as God's beloved Son for the mission being entrusted to him.

Satan's temptations get immediately to the notion of Jesus' identity, calling into question his relationship with God by beginning with the provocative, “*If you are the Son of God...*” This relationship of Father and Son; proud, loving parent and beloved child – announced just verses early at his baptism – is now confirmed through Jesus' unswerving trust in God.

You might describe temptations as those forces in the world that lead you away from God's path, that pull you in a different direction. Or, instead, we might think of them as those unkind voices in our head, telling us that we do not have enough or are not loved enough. Jesus, here, will experience three specific temptations, but we know that – like every living, breathing human being – these internal voices and external forces persist for a lifetime.

When given the opportunity to prove his special status as the Messiah – the Son of God – Jesus demonstrates restraint. He doesn't use his power to satisfy his own appetite (turning stones into bread). He doesn't use it to prove his invincibility (throwing himself off the Temple). Nor does he capitalize on the chance to acquire “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” (by worshipping the tempter). Why? Because Jesus, the beloved Son, is faithful to God, the proud and loving

parent. But, also, because the Messiah who will fulfill the hopes of Israel and bring the kingdom of heaven to the world does not rule with unbridled appetites, arrogance, or tyranny. That is not who Jesus is.<sup>1</sup>

In the first temptation, the Messiah is given a chance to ease his hunger. After forty days of fasting, he is no doubt hungry – lacking in available resources – and fasts are meant to be broken (remember the ordinary meaning of the English word “breakfast); but Jesus refuses.

A rabbi had a daughter approaching the time of her Bat Mitzvah. She was experimenting with how (and whether) she wanted to be Jewish as she approached this decisive day of taking on the discipline of Torah observance. One day, she asked him what was wrong with pepperoni pizza. She had tasted it at slumber parties and had liked it very much. “If God created the earth and every creature on it,” she argued, “what could be wrong with enjoying the taste of the pork that goes into the pepperoni?” She likely expected her father to issue a prohibition and thus provoke the sort of fight that adolescents so often pick and imagine they win. Instead, he responded with a challenge: “You will have to decide,” he said. Then, he held his breath.

After a relentless round of slumber parties, she finally announced her decision. “There is nothing wrong with pepperoni pizza,” she declared. “God made it, and there is nothing wrong with it.” Parental nervousness began to build. She continued: “There is nothing wrong with pepperoni, but there is a lot right with learning self-control. When I smell pepperoni, I will remember that I am a Jew and that I know how to control myself.”

Jesus is essentially given the same test. Both pass.<sup>2</sup> “One does not live by bread alone,” Jesus responds to the tempter. Food may be important, even delicious, but those who understand *who* and *whose* they are know that even a favorite delicacy is not enough to satisfy us fully.

Next, Jesus is tested to see whether he will fall victim to the notion that being God’s beloved makes you immune to the laws of nature. “Throw yourself down,” says the tempter, to see if God will save. This is a version of the same test given each time someone claims that disease is no obstacle to anyone who truly believes. “All who ask, receive,” they say, implying that anyone living with ALS or an addiction (or any other disease that may hunt us or haunt us) is only sick

---

<sup>1</sup> April Hoelke Simpson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>2</sup> Richard Swanson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

because they lack the faith to ask for healing. Jesus does not seem to believe that an exemption from the laws of nature is a proper attitude for Emmanuel – God with us; he is subject to the same laws of nature as we all are. What kind of faith requires a miracle at every turn?

The final test examines Jesus' ability to refuse the lure of revenge. Yes, it involves the act of worshipping Satan rather than God, but the real test is whether or not Jesus will leap at the opportunity to control the inner voices and external forces that bring about chaos and death. As the survivor of a genocide (in Matthew 2) that killed every other toddler in Bethlehem, should not the Messiah seize the power to bring retribution?

Instead, he turns down the devil's offer of political leadership over the kingdoms of the world, and instead offers the kingdom of heaven to all those who will follow him on the path of righteousness. The rest of Matthew's gospel will tell the expanded story of this final test. Can the hope that this upside-down world will be turned right-side-up find a balance between aspiration for justice and an appetite for vengeance? The resurrection of a crucified Messiah will offer, not as a resolution, but a promise that Emmanuel – God with us – means more than we might have initially considered.

For, faith doesn't do away with the struggles and hardships that are part of this life, but rather gives us the courage to stand amid them; not simply enduring but actually flourishing in and through Jesus: the one who was tempted as we are and therefore knows our struggles, our pain, firsthand. No place is so desolate, so challenging that Jesus has not already been there; no test or temptation is so great that Jesus has not already overcome it. This same Jesus invites us to find both hope and courage in the God who claimed not only him, but all of us, beloved children so that we, also, might discover *who* we are by recalling *whose* we are.<sup>3</sup>

Suddenly, we are told, the angels came and waited on Jesus. This is the same word that is used to describe those who attend to our needs at a meal, and – not coincidentally – what we call deacons: those who see and meet the needs of those enduring times of trial. Even as he is served, Jesus will teach us that he is, also, servant to all.

Next, we hear that Jesus withdraws from the wilderness and relocates from Nazareth to Capernaum, which will be the hub of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Matthew provides commentary on this move with a quotation from Isaiah, framing

---

<sup>3</sup> David Lose from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Jesus' coming ministry in terms of light now dawning for all people walking in darkness, including the Gentiles. Here, withdrawing is not a negative – not a faithless act – but a part of his life's natural rhythm.<sup>4</sup> Time and again, Jesus will steal away for times of respite and prayer. Sometimes, these sojourns are interrupted by pressing needs and he will be drawn back in again, but Jesus (like all of us) apparently needs to be able to rest and be restored in order to remember *who* he is and *whose* he is.

Satan offers Jesus shortcuts to reaching his ultimate ends of providing for physical needs, proving God's love and protection, and claiming power over the unjust authorities of this world. Because we might want these same things – and now – we sometimes also put God to the test, wanting to rely on ourselves rather than on God. How will we respond when faced with taking shortcuts that may compromise God's plan? How will the church embody Jesus' trust in God's provision even when we find ourselves in the wilderness; hungry, tired, and short on resources?

The final verse of this text is the pivot between Jesus' time of preparation for ministry – his baptism and temptations – and his ministry in Galilee that is described over the next twelve chapters. Here, he repeats word-for-word what John had earlier said – before the Spirit of God had come down from heaven to rest on him, and before the same Spirit had led him out into the wilderness – saying, “Repent,” in other words: change, set straight your hearts and minds and actions, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Now we see that Jesus knows *who* he is and *whose* he is; and that he is ready to preach the gospel in word and deed. Maybe, likewise, only when we understand our deepest loyalties can we – individually and as the church – effectively demonstrate the good news that, like a loving and proud parent, God cherishes every one of us like a beloved child and calls each of us to, therefore, love one another. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*