

Matthew 4:1-11: Temptation

Introduction:

Today's passage is one of the more famous scenes in the New Testament, whether that's Matthew, Mark, or Luke's version of it. And it's famous because it's so wild and weird. It's a compelling scene in Jesus' life, you know?

We're going to talk about it as Matthew presents it to us. I hope we can sort of enter into the passage, be there and notice what's happening, and that as we do, we discover some important meaning for ourselves and how we're living.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

Catching Up:

Last week we read about Jesus' baptism, and how everyone heard, as he came up out of the water, God saying "This is my Son, who I love. I am so happy with him." Or he brings me great joy, or he brings me great pleasure, or in him I find happiness, or something along these lines.

The Set Up: 1&2:

So. Jesus has just heard God's voice of pleasure over him, the Holy Spirit has settled upon him. He's the

Messiah, and it's confirmed in all that John said right before he was baptized. And the Holy Spirit leads him--urges, guides him--to go out to the wilderness. Think badlands, here. Desert. The greek word for this is where we get the word for "hermit"--this is no man's land. And it's more no man's land than where he already was, on the far side of the Jordan. There's scrub and hot days and cool nights, and Jesus is there, where, "After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry."

Let's talk about this set up for just a second. First of all, there's the devil. There are all sorts of different names for this character. Revelation talks about "the devil, the ancient serpent, the satan." "Prince of the air" and "Beelzebub" are other names we see.

And one of the basic ways that the devil, satan acts against people is by tempting them to sin. In some of our translations we'd read that the devil tested Jesus. We could as easily read that the devil tried to entrap Jesus. It's all the same thing; this devil, this satan, wants to trick Jesus up into breaking faith with God, doing what a faithful follower of God should never do.

I appreciate how one author traces the development of Satan in the Bible: (I'm referring to N.T. Wright here; I suspect he's taken this from someone else, too.) He highlights how Satan was originally, simply the prosecutor on God's heavenly court. The image is sort

of Knights of the Round Table-ish; You know, God's there, and God's court all around him. Satan's job was to accuse people, rightly, appropriately, of the sin they committed. He brought the charges.

“The Satan” means “The Accuser.” But the Accuser? He loved his job. He became a workaholic. So watch out, if that’s you. Satan loved accusing people, and just to be able to do it some more, began to tempt them, entrap them so that he could go in and accuse them.

By the time Matthew writes, God’s People have come to understand satan as sort of the head evil spiritual being, in charge of all those supernatural beings who rejected working for God. Matthew calls this being “the devil”--a title that means “slanderer.” It’s a popular title, and makes sense, because if your real job is to accuse people, and you’ve failed at it, probably the best you can do is talk bad about them and hope they respond in kind. Maybe lowering ourselves to the level of those who slander and antagonize us is the most basic sin trap there is.

So this is who Jesus meets out here in no-man’s land. And after fasting for 40 days--a significant period of time that I just won’t talk much about now--we’re told, in the Bible’s most powerful understatement, that he was hungry.

And the devil comes to him then, this slanderer, and begins to tempt him.

Entrapment One: vv3&4

So. The first trap.

3 The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

4 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’[b]”

It begins with the devil doing what he does best, which is send doubt. Jesus is alone, and really hungry, on the other side of the Dove and the Voice high. And the devil doesn't say “Because you're the Son of God,” he says “If.” It's a “prove it” taunt. And this isn't a small temptation: it's hard to say no to proving that we're right, especially when we know that we're right. This isn't the first time the devil's tried to cast doubt on something God's said: Satan did it in Eden, and it worked really well.

This is a temptation to give into insecurity. The devil temps Jesus to doubt his own experiences and his own identity. He temps Jesus to doubt his own experience and his own identity as God's Beloved. Every single

one of us who are the children of God will be faced with this temptation. And for Jesus to prove it to the devil would be to prove it to himself. The devil wants to create insecurity for Jesus, because of course it's the most insecure who are the most erratic, swayed this way or that by whatever promises them love or acceptance or validation. Any validation at all. And if Jesus acts with the power he has, that proof will wipe out any insecurity or doubt hanging in the air.

But, as--I think--Henri Nouwen points out, this is also a temptation toward meeting relevant, immediate, and personal needs. Toward meeting relevant, immediate, personal needs. Because if you're 40 days hungry, there's nothing more relevant, more immediate, and more personal, than lunch. We might remember the Israelite black-sheep Esau, who traded his place in God's plan of redemption for a bowl of soup. Jesus doesn't do that here.

The devil's single sentence is a trap of insecurity, doubt, and taking care of his own immediate, personal, relevant needs instead of trusting God.

Jesus' Response: Deuteronomy 8:3

And Jesus responds to this single sentence and all its temptation in a clever way: He quotes Deuteronomy. He quotes Scripture as he knows it. And he clearly knows it. "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on

every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

But this is more than just a random quote. It comes from a place in the Old Testament where Moses is reminding God’s People about all sorts of things they need to remember before they enter the land God’s promised to lead them to. The verse is a reminder to trust in God, obey God, depend on God, and not whatever material plenty is before them. Here’s the verse in context:

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deut 8:2-3, NIV)

Jesus is hungry. Jesus has spent his own time in the wilderness. Jesus is modeling what we all need to do, especially when we’re tempted, which is learn the Bible and consider how it relates to us, our situation, our walk with God. And he’s found a place in the story of God’s People that reminds him of his own situation, and calls him to keep faith, to depend on God, to trust God, not whatever might shine and seem impressive

that he might have access to.

But beyond this, Jesus deflects here. He doesn't say "I am the Son of God" and proves it. He doesn't mess around in a debate. Jesus doesn't get into it with the devil, hoping to persuade him or "win" somehow. He doesn't stoop to his level. He shuts him down, says "I'm not playing."

But he says it with Scripture. He says it with Scripture. Jesus goes back to a sure place, a strong place, a safe place, a place that doesn't get hungry or tired or try to meet immediate, relevant, personal needs.

The Bible cares mostly about God and the story of God's work redeeming the world. And when we find ourselves weak or longing to meet our immediate needs because they are always the loudest needs, then we have to turn to Scripture. We have to know it well enough that we can find ourselves in the story of God's faithfulness.

The devil, though, can't help but do what he does anymore. He's a nag. He darts in, but again, Jesus blocks.

Entrapment Two: vv5&6

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the

temple. 6 “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

““He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’[c]”

7 Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’[d]”

Again, the devil pokes at Jesus with that “If you are who you think you are,” but again Jesus doesn’t give in. And this time the devil, cleverly, tries to the route Jesus has modeled for him.

(Evil is quick-study, you know, and maybe this was where Jesus learned that we need to be as wise as serpents, even as we stay as gentle as doves.)

The devil quotes Psalm 91. It’s a psalm about a faithful person’s triumph over evil. Immediately after the portion the devil quotes, we read “You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.”

This “trampling on a snake,” we might know, echoes that Genesis curse God lays on the serpent in the garden of Eden--the serpent who Revelation tells us is this same devil tempting Jesus. And it may be the case

that the devil knows this Psalm so well, can call it to mind, because it contains the echo of a promise that he himself will fall.

The devil really flubs this, you know? I mean the passage also talks about angels protecting Jesus, and he himself is a fallen angel, doing the exact opposite of guarding Jesus carefully.

So the devil here is a really bad example of drawing on the Bible for strength, you know? Don't mimic him. He's doing what we do now and then, which is posing, acting like we know what we're doing--here, drawing on Scripture for wisdom--but we don't really know.

Jesus' Response:

And Jesus just dismisses the devil right out you know. He counter-quotes, like he's a Bible Ninja. It's a verse just a few lines past his previous one: "Don't put the Lord your God to the test." And the word "test" here is a slightly different word from the "test" Jesus is in; this is an examination word, an official inquiry word: "Don't put God's character on trial."

Again, Nouwen, *I think*, has pointed out that to jump would be spectacular; everyone in the busy Temple would see it. He'd be followed immediately, but he'd be followed for being spectacular, for being amazing, not for being the Messiah. Jesus had to deal with this temptation all throughout his ministry, of course:

people were always wanting him to preform, like a dancing bear, so that they could believe in him. He never gave in.

Jesus doesn't jump. But let's pretend, though, that we don't know how this story ends.

Pretending:

If Jesus jumps, he is going to lose the deep confidence that he doesn't have to jump in order for God to be God for him. He's going to do to God what the devil is trying to do to him, trap God, force God to prove his love, like someone in the most dysfunctional sort of relationship. And if God chooses not to save him: Then what? Is God not faithful? Should we not believe? Should Jesus--well, Jesus won't have many choices after that, anyway, will he? That's usually what happens in a relationship when we force the other party to prove they love us with some great show of it: it ends. You kill the relationship.

Jesus chose not to jump, and has to live with that choice. Some of us have jumped; we've been like Gideon, that terrible example of Old Testament faithfulness, who does test God, experiment to see if God's trustworthy or not. God works through Gideon in spite of Gideon, of course.

But Jesus chose not to jump, and in choosing not to jump, he's choosing to trust God to be with him and

guide him, rather than forcing God to preform like the dancing bear we so often want God to be.

God doesn't need to be forced: he is for us, with us, loves us, guides us and comforts us, gives us all we really need, and more than that so we can give to others. He is the healthy partner in our relationship.

But the devil here tempts Jesus to trade the great resource of faith and hope and love for demands based on twisted-up Scripture. And trying to force someone to love you, to prove their faithfulness, is the exact opposite of trust, right? It's like trusting someone to watch your child for you while you go kidnap and ransom theirs.

Jesus never asks us to do that which he doesn't do. He knows how difficult it is to keep faith and trust and hope when what we really long for is God's spectacular action and a personal story of rescue. What most Christians find, I think, and what Jesus found the morning he was resurrected, is that hope and faith and love don't disappoint, and in our patient dependance on God we will over time collect story after story of spectacular rescue, if we just pay close enough attention to the relationship we have with God.

Resolve:

In choosing not to jump, and in choosing to say to the

devil what he says, about “Don’t put the Lord your God to the test,” I think Jesus does something else besides commit to not putting God’s character on trial. If we consider what’s happening from a strong trinitarian perspective, from a strong sense of the intimacy the Father, Son, and Spirit have, then Jesus here is communicating to the devil that he knows who he himself is, and he knows who the devil is, too: just a disobedient fallen angel whose reign is ending.

The devil, who just did a terrible job quoting Scripture, is doing exactly what Jesus refuses to do. Because Jesus is “the Lord your God,” as Paul puts it, “the image of the invisible God.” Jesus is reminding the devil, again through Scripture, of just what the devil is doing wrong by trying to test him.

To quote this passage of all the passages Jesus could is not simply a resolve to reject the devil’s temptation, but it’s also a power move, a great gathering of Jesus’ resolution, confidence, and sense of self, and great ownership by Jesus of just who he is as “God’s Son.”

It’s then that the devil tries one more time. It’s a last deal, a last gasp. He reveals his hand, what he’s wanted all along:

Entrapment Three: vv8-10:

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high

mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

10 Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’[e]”

The devil shows Jesus every kingdom, every region that's ruled with law and government and rulers. And he makes promises: I'll give you all their authority--all their ability to get things done in the places where they rule--and all their splendor--“glory” as some translations have it. We get “glory,” “splendor,” at least intuitively. They sparkle, you know. They shine. They're impressive and intricate and awe-inspiring, these kingdoms Jesus sees.

And the devil promises rule over all this to Jesus. The devil promises that all the effectiveness of the world's inhabited places and all the awe that their most beautiful works--cities and monuments and roads and temples and airports and malls and vineyards--everything that has people crane their necks and look all around--all this will be funneled in Jesus' direction. He'll have all power, all effectiveness, and all the fame of every reality tv show, if only, if only, he'll worship the devil.

Worship here doesn't mean sing a song about how powerful the devil is, you know. I mean, that's the tiniest part of it, the part that creeps above the dirt or the waves, while the rest, real worship, is buried below.

Worship means, literally, to "bow down," and it became a metaphor for a life lived "bowed down" toward someone else: directing your actions and your attitude and your choices in a way that acknowledges this or that person is worthy of your energy, efforts, and time. This person is worth more than you--no matter how much you are worth--and worthy of your acknowledgement of it.

And this is what the devil's asking for. Jesus is being promised all power, and influence and effectiveness and awe of everyone...if only he'll place himself under the devil. If only he'll funnel the tiniest bit of it on. The devil's like a casino, where no matter how much you win, the house always wins more, or a sly hedge fund that shorts stocks, so that even if their bets--investments--fail, they'll earn more than they lost. In the end, the devil will rule over Jesus, even if Jesus rules over everything else.

Something Like a Shortcut:

The devil, in this temptation, is offering Jesus something that looks like a short-cut. Something that looks a lot like the end goal of Jesus' mission.

Jesus is being promised all power, and influence and effectiveness and awe of everyone...if only he'll place himself under the devil. If only he'll funnel the tiniest bit of it on.

But he doesn't. He doesn't. Instead, he turns back to scripture, that safe place, and quotes Deuteronomy again: "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only."

Jesus can't worship the devil. He can't enter into this bargain. He won't. He's directed by scripture--by what he knows to be true about God--not to give away what he simply can't give away. Worship is for God, for his father, not anyone else.

And maybe Jesus knows that there simply are no short-cuts to the joy that's set before him. He may already expect that he'll need to cry "take this cup of suffering away from me" some late night, and that his faithfulness will cost him his life and cause him and those who follow him enormous pain along the way to joy.

There is no shortcut to real influence in people's lives. There is no shortcut to glory. There is no shortcut to effectiveness. These things require work and now and then include heartache. But the devil isn't just playing to Jesus' human inclination toward power and effectiveness--things we all want. The devil's playing

toward Jesus' divine mission as the Messiah, and promising that Jesus will be able to do his work easily, effectively, thoroughly, without it being difficult.

And this is important to note, because we may not sell our souls for all the power in the world--we're too smart for that--but we'll trade bits of our integrity or christ-likeness for effectiveness at work, for the awe of others around us, for authority over anything, without thinking all that much about the trade.

What do we trade to be effective and efficient at work or at home? Do we make bargains and trade favors that we shouldn't? Cut corners? Exclude people? What do we give up in the name of getting things accomplished? And what do we take on? Caffeine addictions and irritability because we don't sleep well anymore? Reputations we shouldn't have? I don't know.

And what do we do in order to be seen as impressive and gain a little fading glory? Do we pad our experiences and our capabilities? Deceive others about what's true of us, or mislead them? How much do we spend in time and money seeking adornment--clothes, gadgets, certificates, adventures, and all the other things we know certain groups of people in certain places will find impressive? And what do we take on? Discomfort or debt or maybe just the non-stop, exhausting rush after whatever is new and loved

by everyone around us?

And what do we trade away in order to have influence in people's lives? Do we tear down others to build ourselves up? Make promises we can't keep or boasts that are lies? What do we do to gain favor and influence and a voice in the lives of others?

But Jesus doesn't take the shortcut. He doesn't compromise himself for power; I pray none of us ever do. (The idea of this temptation in the wilderness as a "compromise" comes from the NIB, Luke, p.99.)

Cared For:

And the devil, having revealed what he was really hoping to get out of all this entrapment, and in the end, being shut down by Jesus, bails. It's revealing, somehow, that this tempter, this accuser, who would have given Jesus everything, won't leave him with some bread. It's okay, because Jesus' trust in God's goodness, without manipulation, is proven true, and God sends angels to care for him.

Experiencing What Jesus Experienced:

And each of us have already, or are, or will--for a first time or again--face similar temptations that Jesus faced.

Like the third temptation Jesus' faced, we'll be tempted to take shortcuts in the things that God has

called us to. We'll welcome quick, painless effectiveness, fleeting glory, or unearned influence, but in doing so we will give away a part of our identity or purpose in the world that we can never get back. We'll be diminished. We can't trade our souls for temporary power, or give to another what only God deserves.

Like the second temptation Jesus faced, we'll be tempted to withhold our trust in God until our self-interested demands are met. Whatever it takes for us to get out of that trap, we have to do it. God is not a vending machine, or a dancing bear. God is our Creator, our Savior, our Lord, our Good Shepherd, our Friend, Comforter, and Counselor, and God will make good for us out of everything. God has more interest in us than we do. We can't put God's promises to the test.

Like the first temptation Jesus faced, we'll be tempted to act short-sightedly and selfishly, meeting our own loud needs instead of trusting God to care for us. We'll be tempted to prove ourselves when we shouldn't care about it, or to doubt and debate about who we are in the Messiah. And we are loved, we are precious, we are children of the kindest parent. God takes care of us, and works out all things for our good.

Conclusion:

We've got to pray, you know, as the Messiah teaches

us: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Jesus didn’t pray that as a theory; he prayed it as a lived experience, and he doesn’t want any of us to have to face what he had to face. But it’s likely we will. And we have to turn away from our own inclinations toward power, toward self-protection, toward shortcuts and self-sufficiency, and turn instead to God, and trust Him to love us.

And to pray “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” would be, at least the littlest bit, to follow Jesus’ own example in knowing the Bible well. We’ve got to know the Bible well. Better than the devil does, at least, which doesn’t seem like too difficult a stretch given how satan uses it in today’s passage.

When our back is against the wall because we’ve entered some trap the devil has set for us, Scripture is the escape route that opens up behind us, into safety, security, and wisdom.

As we continue to walk through Matthew, we’re going to be given a story that will return us again and again to the safety, security, and wisdom of God that Jesus’ life reveals for us. I hope as we go we can reject these temptations Jesus rejected before us.