

TEMPTATION
[Written in oral form]

Matthew 4:1-11
Lent 1, Year A

March 1, 2020
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The passages for Lent tend to be bleak with a sense of despair. Our visual display attempts to capture that tone. []

However this year, the texts are not too gloomy or somber.

Throughout the Sundays of Lent, the fascinating and amazing Biblical stories will **Show Us** the passion and will of God, as lived out through the life of Jesus.

The First Sunday of Lent always begins with the Temptation of Jesus.

I confess that I am always a bit troubled by this intriguing story.

Without warning, without explanation, Jesus is quickly ushered out into the wilderness.

I suppose we could assume that he knew it was an exercise in temptation.

Still, he was all alone, without food, and he was not told when it would end or how it would end.

There were no promises, and no pending reward.

Imagine the emotional crash. Jesus had just been baptized. That was a spiritual high. He had just heard God's voice blessing him.

All could see the divine in him,...and then the battle in the wilderness.

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Interestingly, I have often had that experience of being on cloud nine, and suddenly hitting the ground.

I would think that I had made a spiritual leap, only to stumble soon after.

I wonder why that happens?

Makes one wonder about an active counter spiritual power.

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Alone, near delirium from hunger, and more than likely without sunscreen,.....Jesus was about as weak and vulnerable as a person can be.

Then, like a wolf in the shadows, the tempter comes out to prey on Jesus. That's p r E y.

The struggle begins.

This was a monumental test, with Messianic implications.

Each temptation deals with Jesus' mission, purpose and being.

Would Jesus claim the mythological, even prophetic version of the conquering Jewish Messiah,.....or be a humble servant?

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Moreover, keep in mind two things.

One, regard the devil subjectively. This was not a creature in a red costume. And, do not dwell on the devil's part. The temptations and Jesus' response are the important aspects.

That relates to the second thing: We are to understand that this was an extremely painful, difficult and precarious situation for Jesus.

Keep in mind the aloneness, the wilderness and forty days without food.

I do Not think Jesus started this venture thumping his chest and declaring to God, "I got this." Recall from Matthew 26:39 that Jesus did not want to endure the cross. He cried out, "Take this cup from me." This was a severe and excessive test.

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Slyly, the first temptation presented to Jesus is to turn the stones to loaves of bread. I imagine the stones already looked like bread to Jesus.

The second temptation was about certainty, not faith. Although, it seems benign. Leaping to be rescued is Not an act of faith, but a presumption and a provocation. We do Not compel God to act. This was a test of character and faith.

The third was a test of his purpose and mission. There is a tempting allure to simply take control, end all pain and make things perfect.

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Temptation is the pull / the draw to make a choice that will take us down a path that is destructive or counter to our higher thinking.

It is the desire to engage in short term urges for enjoyment... or to avoid pain,... that threatens long term goals.

Yielding to temptation can hamper growth and wholeness. If that negative choice hurts our relationship with God, then it is a SIN.

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Temptation is an astonishing thing...because we are not tempted by concepts of evil and destruction. We are usually tempted to do something that "appears" satisfying and desirable. We are tempted to do something that appears good. It is often a rationalization.

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Hitler never invited the German people on a trip to ruthless conquest and to the nadir of despair. NO, he talked about pride, unity, self-sufficiency, hard work and entitled destiny. Many of the German soldiers thought that they were defending God when they brutally assaulted the "atheistic" Soviet Union.

Likewise, greedy corporate executives never promote putting their workers, customers or the environment at risk. Instead, they talk about the potential for wealth, ease and satisfaction.

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We are tempted into evil and destruction with the deception that the temptation is actually good and beneficial.

That may not surprise you, but the extreme difficulty in discerning and overcoming temptation may astonish you.....because resisting is almost impossible,...unless..... Unless we are forewarned or experienced.

For the naive and uniformed, the first exposure to a temptation is often overwhelming. It can be overwhelming because the choice has a degree of virtue and desirability.

We cannot be tempted by something we are not the least bit interested in.

No matter how persuasive or lucrative the offer, I could never be tempted to sky dive. There is just No way.

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For Temptation to be temptation there has to be a significant possibility that we will give in to the allure. Jesus was tempted. Let that sink in.

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*Would it have been so wrong to turn stones into bread?
One or two would not have hurt,.....and nobody was around to witness it, either. ????
And, consider if millions of stones were turned into bread.
It would mean the end of world hunger!!*

For a hungry and compassionate social worker like Jesus was, turning stones to bread would have been a very tempting thing to do.

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Nevertheless, there are some deeper lessons here. First and foremost is: Does Jesus follow and obey God,.....or other influences?  
Also, feeding the hungry does not address the exploiters, tyrants and unjust capitalism that cause people to be poor and hungry.

And Most essentially, >>The End Does NOT justify the means.  
The End Does NOT justify the means.  
The journey / the little choices along the way are much more important. Besides, what we consider the "end" is Not the end.

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We face this challenge all the time: should we take short cuts? Should we break the rules for what we consider to be a worthy result?

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President Trump inviting Russia to tilt the elections and blackmailing Ukraine to aid in his re-election were both rationalised as the "End justify the means." He, of course, believes he must continue as president.

The means / the process matters....because in this case, the very framework of democracy is being destroyed.

The way we live / our daily choices matter significantly.  
The perceived goal / the "end",..... is not really the end.  
Life is more complicated than that. Cheating the process, is well,. cheating life.

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To be sure, discerning God's will can be quite a conundrum.
It is a process / a progression of small, incremental decisions.

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I already addressed the traps in the second and third temptations.

Through resisting the temptations, Jesus clarified and confirmed his identity, his faith and his mission.

Jesus the Christ chose to live by faith, ever following and submissive to God.  
He would not attempt to control events or compel God to act.  
Jesus' path would be that of a suffering servant, and not as a conquering saviour Messiah.  
The WAY..... the WAY..... God's way is what saves us and gives us life.

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So, how was this neophyte messiah able to endure such abuse and temptations? ????

Was he super human? Was he more resolute, more powerful than others?
This story, the conditions in this story, are there to show us his raw humanity. Jesus was "tempted".
It was real, not a charade.
So, how.....where did he find the strength?

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I think it is an over simplification to merely say God saved him or he had faith in God.
That flippant response is jumping to the end, and ignoring the means.

Yes, no doubt, God was ever present,.....just as God is ever present in our lives. Well,.....I
hope God is. Let's leave that there.

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Three things helped Jesus endure and resist temptation.  
And, yes..... God was in the process of these three things.

One: Jesus was just beginning his ministry, but he was Not new to life. We know that he spent time in  
Bible study and being surrounded by the faithful. He likely lived a normal life, and was not overly  
isolated. He had experience. He was 30 years old.

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As a church and as parents, we must give the youth room for experience, and for all of us. We must
allow failure,...as we avoid absolutes....because absolutes detest experimentation--experience.

Eating bread is absolutely good, and so is making bread.

Yet, life is more grey than that. We need experience, and more importantly, we need helpful
instructions.

Trial and error is not the way to learn about hiking in grizzly bear country.

We do Not need rigid rules that limit and judge.

We do need to be taught life lessons so we can discern the moments and to identify temptation. As a
church, we can be open to talking about struggles and lessons learned, especially with the young.

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*I was raised by parents who firmly said that alcohol is evil. Members in the Baptist church had to sign a statement that they would never drink. It was covenant to lie.....  
I never saw anyone drink. In those days, drinking was not allowed to be seen in beer commercials. I had no experience, ...and absolutes do not equip us for temptation.  
I went to university, and my first year was **not** pretty. I was lucky to survive. My parents, my church set me up for failure.*

Strength comes from experience with helpful instructions.  
We need to be equipped to resist temptation.  
Without experience and knowledge, temptation will be overwhelming.

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Second: Jesus had resources to use. The handy tool he used was the Bible's wisdom. He knew the scriptures.
The Bible is not the only tool, but it sure is helpful to know enough so as to evaluate a temptation.

Remembering a promise made is beneficial, too.
So is having a good excuse on file,....or money for taxi or uber ride home.
Oh, and memorize a few telephone numbers of friends and family, just in case.
You may not always have your own phone handy.

Be prepared for temptation's surprise with some handy resources.
And, I will add the resource of wisdom. Avoid situations and conditions that make you weaker. Jesus did not have that option.

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Third: Jesus was self aware and saw the big picture.  
Although tempted, yielding to the lure the tempter provided would mean denying himself and his purpose. Doing that would be significant.  
Knowing oneself, including strengths and weakness is important.  
It is essential to be keenly aware of our values / what we stand for.

Keeping a fresh vision of our purpose / our calling provides good counsel. Such as, we are followers of Christ and we believe in the sustaining wonder of God and God's creation.

Wearing God's grace and love on our lapel will fend off many temptations.  
You know I do not mean literally on the lapel.  
Carrying that awareness and devotion in our thoughts is what I mean.

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Okay. There is a lot here to remember.
I have presented numerous points, such as the End does Not justify the means, and the three things Jesus possessed, and there were more instructions.

I am sorry. That is a lot,.... and there will be a test.

Yes, all of us will be tested.

I think money and the desire to be self sufficient and secure is a huge temptation. Trusting money is counter to trusting God.

And, we will face many more, including the passion to change others, control events, to speak less of others and so on.

We will be tested, and we need to be prepared. AND,.....
One last point.

We need hope. Even when we fail, we need hope.

Stories of hope are extremely empowering.
Stories of hope feed our soul and sustain us through dark nights.

This Jesus temptation episode is a story of hope.
Not only was Jesus the human able to resist, but also....

...the devil left him and angels came and waited on him.

The story ends with Jesus surrounded by nurturing and healing angels. That is a wonderful, hopeful image.

God is gracious. God is gracious.

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In a few moments, people will be bringing their stones to front.

These are testimonies from survivors.

This is a demonstration of hope.

May the angels soon arrive.

Amen.