

## *Nourishment for the Journey*

### *Ruminations on Matthew 4.1-11*

This temptation story of Jesus occurs right after he was baptized. It seems fitting based on religious experiences. Typically, as soon as someone makes a new change to their life, a conversion experience, they are immediately tempted by the old values. Transformed living is not a decision we make, and then all is fine. The temptations to go back to one's old ways are most readily apparent at the beginning of one's new lifestyle. Is it worth the effort? Is there an easier way? Does it really require me changing all these various things in my life? Would it be so bad to not be as committed as I initially said I'd be?

When temptation comes, and it most certainly will come, we need to be ready for it. We need to see how the life changes we make will indeed affect not only how we think, but how we organize our time and our priorities. Spiritual transformations are wholistic in their turning our world upside down. Do we have the resolve to carry through, and have we created support networks to help us in our changed lifestyle? Have we restructured our lives, and even the things we have in our homes, our workplaces, and our relationships such that we won't be constantly tempted to go back to our old ways?

It should be noted that Jesus left whatever civilized society he was in and removed himself to the wilderness where he wouldn't be influenced by others. He needed to get his own head and heart set in the right direction without the demands and suggestions of others to reframe his commitment. Do we take time to be by ourselves when we face big decisions in life? After we have asked advice from trusted persons in our lives, do we then go away to be by ourselves to consider all that we have heard, all that is on our heart, and all that we believe God is calling us to be and do?

Hebrew thought has colloquial statements about how God or the Spirit intervened in people's lives. I remember thinking as a youth how magnificent it would be that God would literally come and intervene in my life. I've since recognized that they were not speaking literally, but mytho-poetically. It is the same experience we have when we feel guided, with no one there except our own inner thoughts, to act in a way that we trust is in accordance with God's will.

Here, it would seem odd if we took this first verse literally: that some detectable spiritual being literally led Jesus into the wilderness, and for the expressed purpose of being tempted. Good spirits and good people don't intentionally tempt us and make our lives hard. They rather are there for us when we are tempted so that we will be able to resist the temptation. They don't assemble tests for us to do to see if we will pass their tests. That is manipulative and toxic behavior; and we should run the other direction if there are people in our lives who think this kind of testing of our character to see if we are worthy of gaining their trust is ethically and spiritually justifiable. It isn't! It would be spiritual abuse; and we need to call out that kind of behavior, even when it is in the Biblical texts.

God and the Spirit don't set up hardships for us to overcome. That would be a cruel way to view God. Can you imagine doing this to a child – creating difficulties in their lives to see if they are strong enough, smart enough, loyal enough, or good enough to win our love? What kind of love is that? It isn't love at all. It is emotional and spiritual abuse. It is what insecure, immature, and narcissistic people do to try to ensure that others are loyal to them and worthy of their attention. It is repugnant is what it is.

Jesus, as I see it, was not abused by God or the Spirit in this way. Again, it is a colloquial saying that, if taken literally, makes God out to be a monster – as in the case of Job, and in other places where it said God was testing people. Instead, Jesus led himself into the wilderness through good decision-making – and the early writers saw that as the Spirit at work in him. The Spirit was in him, not outside him as another entity trying to get him to do certain things. Jesus recognized after his baptism that he needed some alone time to figure things out, and to consider how his new commitment was going to radically

change his life, and how he would need to respond to those changes in a way that kept his focus and commitment.

Likewise, there was no literal being who was an adversary, devil, or Satan. Again, this is figure of speech, a mytho-poetic representation of an internal struggle that ancient people used to depict with imagery of another being tempting him. Jesus was struggling within himself, just like every ethical person who has ever lived has had to struggle with their decisions and decide what to do and not do, which values to honor and which to release, what practices one needed to do in order to maintain faithfulness to our noblest virtues and which would detract from cultivating and sustaining those virtues. Literalizing this account only creates a multitude of problems about supernatural powers invading our lives, and leads us into magical thinking rather than the reasoned, critical-thinking we need when we have big choices to make. It also makes us think of Jesus as essentially different from us, which undermines the power of the gospel for our lives.

One of my favorite religious quotes is one from Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan, who says:

*"My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally."*

— John Dominic Crossan, *Who Is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions About the Historical Jesus*

If we take this temptation symbolically or mytho-poetically, we see that it has far more meaning and power to shape our own lives. It makes Jesus more real to us, and helps us to see how we encounter the same kind of temptations in our own lives. It empowers our own spiritual lives in ways in which interpreting it literally could never do, for who among us can make sense of literal supernatural beings coming to intervene in our lives? Five decades and counting, I've never had such an experience. But I have had many instances in which were spiritual in that my thoughts, feelings, and perceptions seemed closer to that which is sacred than what is typical for me. I've had experiences that proverbially "rocked my world" because of their impact on my spirit and consciousness. And I think this is precisely what is being talked about here in Jesus' experience: a pivotal moment in his life like we all have in which everything, or a least a lot, changes.

This way of understanding the story opens us up to much more meaning, and can be made more applicable and inspiring to our own lives.

One of the things I notice in this umpteenth reading of this passage which is new for me is that it says Jesus was famished. He had fasted for a long time (40 days and nights is another colloquial saying for Jews of that time which essentially meant "a long time," not exactly 40 days and nights), and we can well imagine how he was physically and emotionally depleted. And isn't this when temptations come into our lives the most – when we are not at our best? When we are hungry, weak, suffering, and exhausted?

Jesus went into the wilderness to commit to a fast, and to figure out what next steps he needed to take given he had been given clarity of purpose. It is not surprising that the first temptation was one of food. If you are famished, how tempting would food be? Honestly, I would likely have failed that test as I don't put much stock in fasting – especially if I want to make the best decisions about my life. I find I can think better on a sated stomach rather than an empty one.

But the temptation was not only to have food, but to change some other part of reality in order to get food. This thought just came to me for the very first time in 37 years of ministry. What if the real temptation here was not eating bread when he was supposed to be fasting, but was in changing nature to suit our own preferences? Could this be an ecological temptation of using the world for our own benefit, changing it whatever ways we want to in order to serve our own interests? Is it wrong to change a rock, a creation of God, into something in which it was not designed by God to be? We might apply the same principle to mineral, oil, coal, and other types of mining. We might apply it to clearcutting forests for our own purposes,

leaving colonies of trees and plants devastated in the process. Is it our right to drastically change what God has created "good?"

Had Jesus brought some bread or other food, gathered naturally from plants and/or animals, then maybe it wouldn't have been an issue. But to change one part of creation into something it was never intended to be for our own self-service may have been the real temptation here.

Jesus' reply is that we don't live by bread alone, by which he meant food in general. Granted, we need food in order to survive, and no person could literally go without eating for 40 days and survive. The organs would have shut down well before that. Jesus is not saying that food isn't important, but rather that we should not become preoccupied with food such that it keeps us from focusing on our bigger purpose in life. We need to stay committed to our vision and values, even if it means going without food for a while.

I can relate. When I start writing, or thinking, intensely, I can go for hours and not eat or drink a thing. I don't even recognize I'm hungry or thirsty – until I'm finished; and then I feel famished. This was a temptation about a necessity of life, viz., food, and how we are to not even let these necessities keep us from our overarching purpose. We are not to prioritize them over our calling. That is essentially what Jesus is telling us.

The second temptation is one where he imagines himself on the top of the temple. The symbolism is powerful. What if he was the most important person in the temple? What if he was revered as the highest priest?

But the temptation goes beyond his own sense of self-importance; it also involves the depths of his identity and the foolishness of his ego. Again, he is questioning what his relationship to God is. Is his calling to truly live as a child of God, as one who follows God's virtues and values, one that he can really live up to? And if he thinks it is possible for him, then why doesn't he prove it by showing that God will intervene for him? If he is so important, then God will surely save him from destruction if he threw himself down from a tall place.

Jesus has, indeed, read scriptures that could justify him thinking this way. Two such verses come to mind. Ego and insecurity, as well as malnutrition, can make us interpret scripture in a myriad of different ways that are not sacred, but which only serve our own interests. Will Jesus fall into this trap like so many others?

Jesus, however, knows the scriptures well, and he recalls another scripture that contradicts this egoistic thinking. We are not to test God anymore than God should test us. Asking God, or anyone, to prove themselves is all about instilling doubt in the person; a questioning of whether they are really all they think themselves to be. Ego is another area where people are easily tempted away from their greater calling and purpose. If they find a way to gather prestige, attention, and praise, it can be very tempting to forget about the greater calling when one is reveling in the accolades of others. Can you imagine how impressed people would be if Jesus jumped off the temple and survived?

Many a televangelist have sold their souls for the accolades that entertaining people with emotional oratory, light shows, faith healings, and other stunts designed to impress the masses can achieve. Many pastors commercialize meaningful rituals (e.g., drive-by ashes, baptisms, blessings, etc.) of our faith because it appeals to the masses, and allows people to feel good about themselves without inviting them into the deeper spiritual journey of faith that requires more of their time, effort, and reflection. Do we not diminish the faith journey by trivializing it? There is a very real temptation to be less than we're called to be if we discover we can be popular and praised for not giving our whole selves to the calling we've been given – especially, I might add, when others would even prefer you to do less.

Jesus responds that we are not to test God. Ironically, many have interpreted this as him assuming that he was God, and that he was telling the devil not to test him for that would be testing God; which of course, if he really thought this, would mean he would have failed the test – thinking he was God; which would require a monumental ego. Jesus, rather, is saying that he, a human like the rest of us, is not going to put God to the test. God does not need to prove God's self to Jesus. Jesus isn't going to require God to jump through hoops to get Jesus to trust God. That would show a lack of character, as well as some abusiveness towards God.

God created us all as loving beings of inherent worth. If we can't see that worth in God and in others, then we are the problem, not them. People often say that trust needs to be earned; but the opposite is the case. Trust needs to be given based on the worth we see in others. They don't need to earn anything if we really love them. Requiring tests and proofs for them, making them earn our trust, is a toxic way of being in relationship with others. Jesus rejects this manipulative and coercive way of being in relationship with God and others, and affirms that trust is to be given, not earned. He doesn't let his ego and sense of self-importance get in the way of loving others unconditionally as he is called to do.

The caveat, of course, is if people prove themselves untrustworthy, not by our testing of them but by their own free will, then we need not continue to keep trusting them. Jesus telling his disciples to kick the dust off their feet of those who refuse to see the light even when we have made multiple attempts to help them reminds us to be wise in how we trust others. Nevertheless, our trust is to precede their actions. As fallible human beings, if we only trust those who earn it, then no one would ever be trusted. Trust is a spiritual practice of assuming the best about people, and nurturing that trust even amidst their multiple failures when they are truly repentant and want to change for the better. However, if they don't care about being better, wiser, or more ethical, then their own behavior and character has declared that they are not trustworthy.

The third temptation is not about a necessity of life, nor is it directly about ego and self-importance; but it is a very real temptation in that it is connected to our deepest desires and aspirations – including our purpose. Our mission or purpose in life is a very powerful thing. Indeed, it is so powerful that we can give it ultimate value in our lives, and consequently place it even above loving others. Who doesn't know those who have dedicated their lives to lofty goals and have ended up treating others badly in the single-minded quest to reach those goals? Maybe we've been there ourselves.

Is our life's purpose or ambition more important than the loving relationships we have with others? If so, then we will fail the third temptation. Jesus considered in his own mind what it would be like if he had all the power in the world. What if he could rule over all; become the next Caesar? Have we not had such fantasies of what we would do if we had control over the world? Have we not thought what great good we could do for the world if we had godlike powers to control the way the world operates? Wouldn't Jesus, we think, be the perfect one to have such authoritarian control? Would he not be a benevolent dictator who would lead the world to peace and justice?

Well, this one obviously has ego involved as well, but here it is not all about self-glory, but rather for a genuinely good cause – making the world a better place. How tempted would that be if we could create a better world if we were given the power over others? But Jesus rejected, as we should too, this temptation of putting our own good purposes above our love for people.

Jesus recognized that to control people is not to love them. Indeed, it is to love ourselves through a rationalization that we are loving others. We become self-deceived when we think we can make better decisions than others can make for themselves. It may make sense to us if we are better equipped to make good decisions; and in actuality, if we are better equipped, then we likely would make better decisions. But in doing so, we would eliminate their own choices and moral agency.

We don't make people better by doing and deciding everything for them. This is the problem with controlling people. They think they can make better decisions, and that all would be better if we all left it up to them to decide. But Jesus, who most of us would agree would be the best one to make decisions for us, decided not to be so controlling. He thought it better to let people decide for themselves; even if they got it wrong. For to not allow them to decide for themselves denies them use of the image of God within them. They become our automatons, not freely thinking and freely choosing persons who have the right to make their own decisions.

When tempted with control over other people, Jesus refused to take control. He valued what is essential to people, their ability to make moral and life decisions for themselves, more than having them live by the "right" choices he would like them to live by. Where is the morality in forcing people to do something? How can they improve themselves if someone else is dictating to them what they should do?

To worship God is to worship what God created. God created us all with a divine image of goodness and free will. To deny others the opportunity to make moral choices and decide things for their own lives, we deny them not only their humanity but also their sacred worth that God instilled in them. Jesus would have none of this. He'd rather have people decide wrongly than for them to be his robots that obeyed his every command.

You can't be ethical, and you can't allow others to be ethical, if you control the decisions of their lives. Loving others means letting them choose for themselves, right or wrong, and trying to be there for them in both their successes and failures. People are not made loveable by never making mistakes. God already made us all loveable. We simply need to affirm that which is loveable in people, even despite themselves, and trust that our caring for them in rightness and wrongness is what really matters. To do otherwise is to serve values other than God's values; for God loves us all, and created us with free will and the ability to make our own life decisions.

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/20 & 23/2023*