

“Responding to Temptation Faithfully”

Matthew 4:1-11

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The story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is one of the best known in all of scripture. It shows up in popular books and films and is often referred to in public life. We begin each Lent with this story and thus preachers who pay attention to the Christian year and follow the lectionary have an annual opportunity or burden to explore this text.

This is my thirty-eighth year of ministry. So, I have explored many aspects of this text – the nature of temptation for individuals, the church and our nation. I have even been to the traditional site where some think this story is set and eaten at the Temptation Restaurant, though I confess it didn’t feel quite right eating wonderful kabobs while thinking about Jesus’ forty days and nights without food.

But while it is helpful to understand the nature of temptation and be able to visualize the setting - if not eat the food – it is also helpful to consider the things that enable Jesus to resist temptation and remain faithful to his calling. He is Jesus and there is only one of him. He has a connection to God that is unique. But he is still human and he is our example and guide. And thus, the things that help him respond faithfully to temptation might help us.

One thing that helps Jesus is that he fasts for forty days and nights. I realize this sounds like one of the craziest things I have ever said, and I have said some crazy things. But while we can only imagine feeling depleted of energy, and while food is one form of temptation the devil uses, fasting is a form of spiritual discipline in Jewish tradition.

Jesus offers counsel for how to fast in the Sermon on the Mount, in verses we read from Matthew 6 on Ash Wednesday. The prophet Joel calls the nation to sanctify a fast as part of the process of repentance (2:15). And there are many other references to fasting in scripture. It is a means of tuning out distractions and tuning into God, centering life in

the Holy. Thus, when Jesus arises from the waters of baptism and anticipates his upcoming period of testing, he prepares by fasting.

The implication for us is not necessarily that we must incorporate fasting into our habits of spiritual discipline - though this is an option - but that pursuing some habits of discipline diligently will strengthen our connection to God and thus prepare us for the battles of faith we will face. This might involve centering prayer or *Lectio Divina*. It might involve times of quiet devotion or walking the labyrinth. It might involve journaling or some other spiritual practice we find helpful, but whatever centers us more deeply in God will strengthen us.

The late fourth-century Bishop of Antioch John Chrysostom put it this way in one of his baptismal instructions.

So also for you, these thirty days are like the practices and bodily exercises in some wrestling school. Let us learn during these days how we may gain the advantage over that wicked demon. After baptism we are going to strip for the combat against him; he will be our opponent in the boxing bout and fight. Let us learn during this time of training the grips he uses, the source of his wickedness, and how he can easily hurt us.

Like boxers preparing for a fight, we root our lives in God because now that we are followers of Jesus, we have joined the great struggle between good and evil, and we will be tested. Jesus fasts, we may pray silently, but however we do it, strengthening our connection to God helps.

Another thing that helps Jesus is that he knows who he is – not just that he is God’s Son, the Messiah, but what kind of Messiah he will be. This is critical because each temptation focuses on the nature of Jesus’ character and identity. At a certain level, all temptation does. It tries to make us forget who we are and thus cheapen our lives.

The devil tries to get Jesus to turn stones to bread, not only meet his immediate need, but use his power selfishly. He tries to get him to throw himself off the highest point of the temple and force God to deliver him, to put on a show in order to advance his ministry. He tries

to get Jesus to shift his loyalty to him in order to gain worldly power, to shift the primary focus of his work to political and military influence.

But in each instance Jesus refuses because he knows who he is. He will use his influence for others. He will not resort to parlor tricks. And he is a Messiah who will lay down his life for his friends, not a political warrior who will deliver his people from Roman oppression, as worthy as that cause might be. Every temptation strikes at the heart of Jesus' character and each is paradigmatic of the kind of challenge he will face throughout his life. Luke's version of the story ends on an ominous note which underscores the ongoing nature of temptation, "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him *until an opportune time.*"

The implication for us is that it is helpful to have a clear sense of who we are. Jesus cannot be blown about by the winds of influence because he knows who he is. The clearer we are about our identity as beloved children of God, the greater our ability to resist temptation will be. Martin Luther said that when he faced temptation, he would say to himself, "But I am baptized." It was a way of remembering his identity.

We may be tempted in some personal way that involves betrayal. We may be tempted to compromise our values at work or school. We may be tempted to choose a path that is "O.K." – just not our path. I think of the scene in Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* in which Jesus dreams on the cross about what it would be like to have lived a normal life – to marry, have children and work a normal job. There is nothing wrong with any of these things. They just don't fit Jesus' calling. We too may be tempted like this, but however we are tempted, it will challenge us to be someone other than who we are.

I think of a challenge I had in the first year of co-owning an athletic store in Louisville, Kentucky. A friend and training partner and I bought the business we worked for and we brought in a third partner to help defray the cost. It became apparent rather quickly that we had made a mistake. The man, who was older than us and presumably more informed about good business practices, wanted to do a number of shady things – change our tax status after it was legal to do so, not report all of our sales to mall ownership so as to lower our lease payments, and skim money, thus hiding earnings from the IRS. "Everyone does it," he said.

“No, I don’t believe everyone does it,” I said, “and even if they do, we will be the first not to do it!” It might have been tempting to keep a little extra money, if I had not had a sense of who I was - a reasonably honest person who didn’t want to go to jail - but I did know. The clearer we are about who we are, the easier it will be to resist temptation.

There is one other thing that helps Jesus respond to temptation faithfully – he knows scripture inside and out. This is important not only because scripture informs our understanding of God, ourselves and all of life, but because the devil knows scripture too and tries to use it to manipulate us. “Psalm 91 says that God will protect you from harm,” the devil says to Jesus, “So, go ahead and throw yourself off!”

If Jesus did not know scripture, he could easily be misled and manipulated. Maybe he was wrong. But Jesus knows scripture. He references key texts in his response to each temptation. And he not only understands what each text means, he has a grasp of the whole of scripture so as to know which texts should be referenced when.

The implication for us is that the more scripture we know, the more prepared we will be to respond faithfully to temptation. It is good to be informed on any subject. Otherwise we will buy into all sorts of ridiculous ideas. But it is especially good to be biblically informed because scripture shapes our understanding of everything and there are not only different interpretations of various texts, there are people who will try to manipulate us with their selective reading of isolated verses.

Over the years I have had many people come into my office and say, “I know I don’t believe certain things other people are claiming. Can you tell me why?” Years ago, many churches like ours realized we were hammering in texts through sword drills and other approaches but missing the big picture of the biblical story, the metanarrative of God’s love. So, we began emphasizing the big picture, which was wise, but many churches stopped teaching the details, which was not. We need the big picture, but we also need the details so as to be able to discern for ourselves, with the guidance of the Spirit, what is true and what is not. I am grateful that in this church we still teach our children and youth the texts and continue to work with them throughout our lives.

Matthew's version of this story ends on a reassuring note. "Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him." I'd like to think the angels had been there all along. Surely we are not alone in our times of testing. God is with us always. Perhaps this assurance can help us too as we confront temptation. We are wise to center our lives in God, we are empowered by a clear sense of identity and we are guided by a deep knowledge of scripture, but in all things, we are accompanied by a God who loves us and attends to our every need.