

“Considering Our Temptations”

Matthew 4:1-11

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There are many religious themes that seem passé and stodgy in a sophisticated postmodern world, but *temptation* is not one of them. We still recognize the power of it all too well, we often have simultaneous responses of revulsion and attraction, and we recognize the value of addressing it, even if we are at best marginally successful in doing so.

So, it is helpful to begin the season of Lent each year with the story about Jesus’ temptations. Even he is not immune, as scripture says he is tempted in every way that we are, but without sin (Hebrews 4:15). It has always struck me as ironic how many Christians were upset by the film “The Last Temptation of Christ” which is based on Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel, largely because of a scene in which Jesus dreams about the possibility of having had a normal life, marrying and starting a family. If he was tempted in every way like us, what is so upsetting about this?

Anyway, in the story we have read today from Matthew, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness right after his baptism. It is preparation for his mission and foreshadowing of ways he will be challenged throughout his life to alter his path. Luke’s version of this story ends with the statement that when the devil had finished every test, he departed from him *until an opportune time* (4:13). Until an opportune time... The testing is not over, it has just begun, but the focus is clear. It is about Jesus’ character and identity, what kind of Messiah he will be, his loyalty to God.

We know the specific forms of this temptation for Jesus – to use his power to meet physical needs like hunger; to put on a display to draw a crowd; to use whatever resources are available, even those attached to evil, to take charge of the world’s political structure. There are insights for us in each test, as well as pitfalls of misunderstanding, but perhaps what is most helpful is the underlying concern.

We may not be tempted in exactly the same ways Jesus is, though there are points of connection for us as individuals and the church in this

time, but the underlying challenges to character and identity, faithfulness to our calling and loyalty to God, remain the same in every time and place. This is how we are tempted most and this is why it matters how we respond. We are not talking about isolated failures and indiscretions. We are talking about the essence of who we are and Whose we are.

One central way we are tempted today is to give in to the spirit of escalating hatred and hostility that is defining our culture. From increased incidents of road rage to family members shooting family members over political differences, from online bullying to in-person insults and attacks, we all encounter this spirit every day.

We know that giving in to this spirit is not consistent with the Christian calling to love our neighbor, forgive those who hurt us, and pray for our enemy; not to pay anyone evil for evil but if it is possible, so far as it depends on us, to live peaceably with all (Romans 12:17-18). We know this, and we do not think of ourselves as even being hateful, but it is difficult not to be affected or tempted in some way to respond.

If we can't beat them, join them. We can't just let insults go. If we simply turn a blind eye or ear, or turn the other cheek, as Jesus suggests, won't the mean and nasty people prevail? Dana's father used to have a saying when our two Germans Shepherds got into what we call a rip-it, a playful tussle. "Rika starts it, but Tusker finishes it!" he would say. Others have started this mess; we need to finish it!

And not only are there times when we need to speak up for a cause, there are verbal rip-its we did not start. Near the end of the 19th century, Old Testament professor John R. Sampey delivered an apology to the Long Run Baptist Association in Louisville, Kentucky for his behavior at a previous meeting. He was defending Dr. William H. Whitsitt, a church historian and president of Southern Seminary at the time, who had claimed his work tracing Baptists back to the early 17th century in Europe. We wouldn't find this controversial, but back then the majority of Baptists believed we went back to the John the Baptist...

So, Whitsett was in hot water, he eventually had to leave, and Sampey was defending him – vigorously! That is, he spoke in a prophetic rage and at one point, jumped off the Dais and landed next to

people on the second pew. He said he hoped he was never tempted to do that again but then added that he hoped no one would say so many enraging things about a colleague that would make him do that again. In other words, he wasn't taking all the blame, his anger was justified...

Sometimes so is ours, but to respond in kind to malice and venom is not only contrary to Christian teaching; it is rarely productive, as one insult simply leads to another; and it is profoundly unhealthy. Finding another way to respond to meanness has many benefits.

In a February 2 article posted on Baptist News Global Brett Younger suggests the way of forgiveness. We can practice empathy he says, without excusing bad behavior. We can forgive mean people not for what they do, but for who they are. We do not expect remorse if it is not in their toolbox, but we do expect forgiveness to change who we are.

Neuroscientists support this Christian truth, Younger says. Forgiveness is good for us. "Researchers conducting fMRI brain studies have discovered when we imagine forgiving a grievance — without even informing the transgressor — we deactivate our brain's pain network (the anterior insula), stopping the pain of the grievance. Forgiveness shuts down the nucleus accumbens and dorsal striatum. This stops the desire for revenge. Forgiveness activates our prefrontal cortex, restoring self-control so we make better decisions."

In other words, scientific evidence supports Jesus' ideas about forgiveness as a form of self-healing, says Younger, "We can forgive without accepting what has happened to us. We are not at the mercy of mean people. God's kind of forgiveness frees us from the need to please people who will not be pleased." That seems like a worthy alternative to giving in to the temptation to respond in kind to hatred and hostility.

Another central way we are tempted is to forget that we are people of the resurrection and thus give up hope. There are times when people face so many personal hardships that it is understandable that they are tempted to give in to despair. I worked with a colleague in ministry who lost not just one but two children to separate tragic accidents. How does one retain any hope for something good in life, much less trust in God, under such circumstances? I have worked with people who lost loved

ones, marriages, homes, and jobs, sometimes many of these at once. The book of Job may be a fictional story, but there are people who experience what he experiences or something similar.

There are also times when it is tempting to lose hope for the world. How can people in Gaza or the West Bank retain hope for a better future, how can the people of Israel? The current “peace” is so superficial, fragile, and unjust, that it has no chance of enduring. What about the people of Ukraine or Afghanistan, South Sudan or Myanmar? What about the millions in our nation who are losing freedoms because they fall into some category deemed to be expendable? What reason do we have to believe there is a possibility that any of this will change?

One response of faith is to assert that God’s intent will ultimately prevail, but how does this help those who do not live to see the time when it does? The fate of six million Jews who died in the Nazi Germany was not affected by this reality. What is the meaning of hope, if it is not for this life, not for the people who are asked to retain it?

We are people of the resurrection, those who are called to live with Easter hope in all circumstances, but we still live in a Good Friday world or perhaps somewhere between the cross and the empty tomb? What does it mean to live with Easter hope?

In part, it means to trust that there is more than this life. People like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. died for their faith, trusting this claim. But it also means that because we do trust it, we are willing to live with the kind of hope that empowers us to fight for what is right and just in a way that makes a different future possible. Those who give up hope have no say in the future, no agency, no voice. Those who refuse to give in to despair have a chance of helping.

It’s like buying a lottery ticket, though I am not suggesting you do. I have never bought one, partly because I spent all my luck on a life mate. But if we never buy a ticket, we are guaranteed not to win. So it goes with hope and our engagement of personal challenges and the ongoing fight for justice in this world. Hope gives us a chance.

One other central, existential way we are tempted is to think there is something better than our life in Christ, or we might say FOMO, the

fear of missing out. I'm not sure where the term originated, but it has even made it into the dog training world. A puppy's discontent, for example, at being put in a crate, might not be simply resisting restraint but also the fear of missing out on something exciting. There are certainly people in and out of the church who think Christian life is mostly about the denial of anything that even looks like it might fun.

I think of the old Adam Ant song "Goody Two Shoes" and its lyrics "Don't drink, don't smoke, what do you do?" But even for those who don't think this way, there can be the perception that faith involves a denial of things better than what faith offers in the way of status, wealth, and pleasure. Unhindered by moral and ethical guardrails, not to mention a calling to service and humility, life can be so much more fun and fulfilling... or can it?

I had friends in high school who made this argument. I have known people throughout my adult life who think the church is for fools. And there is a kind of foolishness, from the world's perspective, about much of our faith – putting others first, forgiving people who hurt us, using so much of our time and money to help people in need, being willing to lay down life for someone else, taking seriously the calling to follow a man who spent most of his time with those considered to be rejects and nobodies and ended up getting killed for his trouble.

It is tempting to see wisdom in this line of critique... but deep down we know there is no basis for FOMO, there is no better way to live, no path to greater fulfillment and joy than this path of self-giving love. God does not create us with one set of deepest desires and then challenge us to ignore them for some random alternative as a test of faith. We are made to find our greatest joy in service and giving, in seeking justice and practicing love, in following the one human being who fulfilled God's purpose completely. Like all other temptations to our character, the temptation to think we are missing out on something better by following Jesus falls apart under the light of close examination.

Our story ends with Jesus remaining true to his character and loyalty to God and then being waited on by angels. May God grant us the grace to have a similar experience.