

CHRIST ENCOUNTERS: TEMPTED

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 4:1-11

During this season of Lent, I am preaching a sermon series called **Christ Encounters**. Each week, we will look at a different person or persons who interact with Jesus. Last week, we read about the father who brought his spirit-possessed son to be healed. After the disciples failed to help the boy, the father's confidence in Jesus dropped so that he even doubted if Jesus could cure the boy. When the father realized who Jesus was, he exclaimed, *I believe; help my unbelief*. The father confessed that while he did have faith in God, his faith needed strengthening. *Help my unbelief*, was his cry.

Today, I want to look at a different story—one that we are all familiar with. It is the account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

The Gospel of Matthew begins by offering us a long and detailed genealogy of Jesus. Matthew then tells us about Jesus' birth, the visit of the wise men, the holy family's escape to Egypt, as well as their return. In chapter 3 we learn about John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. In chapter 4, we are transported directly from the baptism to Jesus' temptation out in the wilderness.

Jesus' baptism by his cousin John is described like this: *Suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

You would think that after an event as momentous as God speaking that there might be some theological unpacking of what had happened, or at least a high five and a victory lap. But no. Instead, Jesus is immediately whisked away from the lush landscape of the Jordan River to the inhospitable environs of the wilderness.

In Jewish spirituality, the wilderness is a fiercely profound place. Several thousand years earlier, when the Hebrews fled Egypt, Moses led them through the wilderness. In the wilderness, they encountered God, they doubted God, they tested God. In the wilderness, they received God's law. In the wilderness, they were forged into a people. It is no accident that Jesus takes a spiritual retreat into the wilderness in order to fast and to pray.

So, following the events of his baptism, we read, *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil*. And what we see here is that Jesus goes, not of his own volition, but at the direction of the Holy Spirit. Clearly, powerful forces are at work here.

And in that wilderness, he fasted for 40 days and nights.

By fasting, we don't know if he ate nothing at all or simply lived on a reduced diet. It doesn't really matter because at the end of the fast, he was famished. I imagine that his overriding desire was to get home to a big, hot meal.

But remember, this fast was not a survival situation. Jesus was not lost in the wilderness. This was a spiritual retreat, an alone time for prayer and contemplation. This fasting was a discipline. If the situation ever got dire, he could simply walk home. He was hungry, but not perishing.

The wilderness can be a terrifying place because in the wilderness we are our most vulnerable. It is there in the wilderness that we feel most alone and exposed. In the wilderness, we are subject to our inner thoughts and our doubts—feelings that we normally mask with the distractions of everyday life. But in the wilderness, free of these distractions, the silence opens all the possibilities of our lives.

It is at this moment, at the end of the fast, that the devil appears. And the devil presents three temptations to Jesus: to make bread to eat, to be rescued by angels, and to rule the world.

I like to think of these three as Sustenance, Security, Sovereignty.

But before we get to that, let's talk about the devil. The name *Satan* is a Hebrew word. In the Greek of the New Testament, we read *diabolos*/devil. We also find terms such as tempter, adversary, ruler of darkness, and others. In the story of the temptation, we find *Satan*, *devil*, and *tempter*.

In the early Old Testament, Satan appeared as an agent of God—something like an employee. Satan's role was to uncover the weaknesses of humans. For example, think about the story of Job.

Later on, Satan becomes increasingly hostile and harmful. He interferes with God's relationship to Israel through temptation, accusation, and disruption.

Gradually, Satan's identity shifts to become God's chief competitor. We begin to witness this grand cosmic struggle between the forces of good and light and those of evil and darkness with Satan as the force of evil in the world.

But here, at the start of Jesus' ministry, I don't perceive any evil or malicious intent from this figure. He simply appears to be testing Jesus. And since Jesus has been led into this situation by the Spirit, it would appear that Satan is performing his job as God's agent.

Let's look at the three tests posed by the devil.

Sustenance

The first temptation is when the devil challenges Jesus saying, *If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.*

What stones? Any stones. The landscape is littered with rocks. We look at this as a temptation to make food to eat. But really it is just a parlor trick for Jesus to reveal who he is. *IF you are the Son of God*, prove it. Yes, Jesus is no doubt famished, and making bread would be tempting, but doing so would reveal a lack of confidence in God.

Jesus' response to the Temptor's call to action is to draw upon the words of scripture—something he will do all three temptations.

Tells the devil, *It is written, one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*

This is not just a saying, but it is a quote from a section of the book of Deuteronomy which recounts the story Israel's 40 years in the wilderness. In the wilderness, the people had no food, but God sustained them with manna. The point of this passage is that all we have comes from God.

Security

The second temptation has to do with Security.

The devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, to what was called the pinnacle of the temple. This is a top wall of the temple built on the edge of a cliff. It was a terrifying and deadly drop from that point. The devil tells Jesus, *If you are the Son of God, jump.*

Now, why would Jesus do that? The devil is ready with some scripture of his own. He uses Psalm 91 which says, *God's angels will catch you so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.*

The promise here is that God protects his own, and if Jesus is God's Son, then God will surely protect him.

Jesus response is to say: *Again it is written, do not put the Lord your God to the test.*

This quote is again from Deuteronomy. The full quote is *Do not put the Lord our God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.*

Again, when the Israelites were in the wilderness, they ran out of water. They complained to God. God viewed their complaints as a test. They should have faith

that God would provide for them. By complaining and challenging God they were essentially saying, “Are you really help us or not?”

When the devil challenges Jesus to jump off the cliff to let the angels catch him, Jesus’ response is that he does not need to. He has faith in God. Jumping would only demonstrate a lack of faith.

Sovereignty

In the third temptation, the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. The devil says to Jesus, *All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.*

Jesus says to him, *Away with you Satan! for it is written, worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.*

The promise here is that if Jesus will shift his allegiance to the devil, then he can rule the world. But as Jesus knows, the world is not the devil’s to give. His quote from Deuteronomy is from a larger passage reminding the Israelites that all that they have—their wealth and comfort, their homes and farms—is a gift from God. It is God’s to give, not the devil’s.

The devil then departs.

Conclude

As Christians, we have power—God-given power. The question is, how do we choose to use this power? Do we use this power to demonstrate to the world that we are indeed powerful? Or do we use the power in service to others? The temptation before us to show the world that we are special, that we are better, that we are worthy of being praised.

The irony of the temptations is that while Jesus refused to “perform” for Satan, we know that he was capable of doing those things. Jesus didn’t refuse to make bread from stones because he couldn’t. He refused because doing so would be to use his power for the wrong purpose. We all know of how, when the time was appropriate, that Jesus created bread and fed those who were hungry.

In this season of Lent, let us use this time to prayerfully and mindfully evaluate how it is that we use the power that God provides us. Do we use this power for ourselves, or do we use it in service to God? I pray that it is for God.