

The First Sunday in Lent (March 5, 2023) Text: Matthew 4:1-11

***“With Jesus: In the Wilderness”***

As we continue our Lenten journey, we find ourselves once again with Jesus. It is a place we want to be, but we soon learn that to be with Jesus often winds up in situations we might have preferred to avoid. As we move through Lent, we know that we are on a journey that will eventually lead us to Golgotha. That is not a preferred destination. As we travel with Jesus, we know that He will begin to face opposition, questions, challenges . . . again, situations we might wish we could escape. Certainly, the wilderness is much less preferred than, say, a nice resort or beachfront, or cabin in the mountains.

Yet today, we are with Jesus in the wilderness. It is no accident that we are here. Matthew tells us, ***“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”*** Matthew habitually uses time stamps like, ***“Six days later . . .”*** and ***“the next day . . .”***, so for him to employ the Greek word τότε (“then”) here suggests a kind of an immediacy, and urgency to the action. Thus, Jesus comes up out the waters of His baptism, hears the voice from heaven declare, ***“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,”*** and boom! Out into the wilderness!

He is led there by the Spirit ***“to be tempted.”*** What does that mean? You have to draw the inference that this is somehow tied to the question ***“What does it mean to be the Son, the Beloved?”*** That’s the immediate question before Jesus, and it is that identity that Satan will try very hard to shape. That’s what these temptations are designed to do . . . it’s what all temptations are designed to do: the shape us into something other than the image of God.

It’s what happened to Adam and Eve. Genesis 1 tells us that God said, ***“Let us make humankind in our image . . .”*** We can engage in all kinds of lengthy debates about what exactly “image of God” means (such debates have been going on for millennia). Suffice it to say at this juncture that when Genesis tells us, ***“So God created humankind in his***

*image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them,*” it is at the very least saying that these creatures were of a design and intention directly from God. We begin very quickly to recognize some features of this: They spoke with God. They seemed to be in harmonious communion with God. They wanted what God wanted.

What changed that? A seemingly innocuous question: **“Did God say?”** I say “innocuous” because it actually might be something asked in a Bible Study (in fact, most of the study materials published by our own Concordia Publishing House follow that very model — *“Read John 15:5. What does God say about our connection to Jesus?”*) Yet the question that comes to Eve (and by extension to Adam) is not there to solicit information or understanding; it comes to insert doubt and uncertainty.

That’s what Satan tries to do with Jesus. Twice he comes at Jesus with the issue of what it means to be the Beloved: **“If you are the Son of God . . .”** That phrase has many anchors in the Scriptures and in the Graeco-Roman world: The Davidic kings were called “son of God” [see 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 28:6; Psalm 2:7]; “sons of God” or “children of the Most High” could also designate angelic beings, members of the divine council [Genesis 6:2; Psalm 82:7]; in the Greco-Roman world “Son of God” became an honorary title for the Caesars; the prophet Hosea offers another possible definition. There God says, **“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son”** [11:1]; already in the birth narrative Matthew has applied this verse to Jesus, interpreting Joseph and Mary’s move from Egypt to Nazareth as the fulfillment of Hosea’s prophecy [Matthew 2:15].

This first attempt by Satan aims at the physical aspects of what that could mean. What king goes hungry? What god listens to his growling stomach? What king worth his salt lacks for anything? What god doesn’t show off his power now and then? So, Jesus, if that’s what you are, eat, my boy. Enjoy being the Son of God!

But what would that say about what it means to be the Son, the Beloved? Thinking that Matthew has latched on the “people of God” motif, he tells

us that Jesus becomes the embodiment of what it means to be Israel. But Jesus is not the Israel we read about in Exodus, who doubted, even dismissed, God's provision for them. *"Gee, Moses, weren't there enough graves in Egypt? You had to bring us out here to die?" "Enough of this crappy manna; we want real food!" "Where are we going to find water out here?"*

Jesus, true son of God, models human reliance on God for food, for strength, and for life itself. It's as if He is saying to Satan, *"If I am the Son of God, I will look to see what my Father wants, and I will do that!"* But it is couched in very human language: *"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'"* ("one" here is the Greek word *ανθρωπος*, "human").

It is not enough that Jesus defeats Satan in this contest; He must also show us how we defeat Satan when temptation comes our way. It is not by superpowers that only He, the Beloved Son, possesses, *"but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'."* That's where we must look to find out what God wants for us and what He provides to us.

*"Then,"* (there's that word *τοτε* again, which tells us that things are speeding along), *"the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

There's a lot going on here. On one level, we might cast a questioning eye as to why Jesus is letting Himself be led around like this. Doesn't this cast at least the appearance of cooperation? Should He not totally resist? I conclude that He allows Himself to be put through these situations precisely to show us how to react when we face them.

The devil is certainly very clever (Genesis said, "subtle") here. *"So, Jesus,"* he puts forth the case, *"you want to throw around some Scripture? Okay, let's try on a few passages and see where that leads us."*

*I'm sure you will see that the Bible defends my point of view.*” Satan here presents what happens a lot — a whole lot — with the Word of God: people love to make the Bible say what they want it to say. Satan obviously wants the Bible to champion his viewpoint that irresponsible behavior is anything but irresponsible behavior. *“Go ahead,”* he argues, *“be a total idiot — jump off the bridge. Play with the poisonous snakes. Swim in the shark-infested waters. That will show how much faith you have! Prove to God that you are worthy to be called the Beloved Son.”*

So there is that part of this involved temptation. As bad as that is, it is much worse. What would happen had Jesus taken this deal, accepted this fraudulent conceit that one can defy the laws of physics as a matter of faith? The hidden agenda here is to gain a reputation that will bring the crowd flocking to Jesus. The temple courtyard was always filled with people; if someone suddenly leapt off the pinnacle and floated unharmed to the ground, there would be multiple witnesses and the *“Wow!”* factor would have been incredible [I struggled with that word here, because incredible is just the opposite of what Satan is looking for; he wants it to be highly credible so that Jesus could gain a following and not have to fulfil the mission His Father had given Him].

***“If you are the Son of God”*** once again becomes, *“Jesus, you get to choose what it means to be the Beloved. What’ll it be? Death by crucifixion or fame and glory by astonishing display?”* Which would you choose? I know in the comfort of our present surroundings, and because you’ve been primed to think that the cross is the option you’re supposed to pick, it’s easy to say, *“Oh, I choose crucifixion!”* Really? I know we’d like to think that highly of ourselves, but . . . Come on, really? You pick: Surgery or rehab? Chemotherapy or talk therapy? You know that our inclination is always to move to the less painful option.

You get to accomplish two goals at once. You show how faith-filled you are by letting God catch you; you come up with an even smarter way of gaining followers. Where are you going to get a better deal than that?

Except for the two problems this would raise for Jesus, who is indeed the Beloved Son.

Problem One: You don't put God to the test. No, you do not lie down to take a nap in the center lane of I-480 because "*God will protect me.*" No, you do not willy-nilly sell your home and car and all your worldly goods because "*God will take care of me.*" No, you do not say to the attending physician, "*I know all the results say that I need surgery to remove the infected organ in my body, but I'm going to let God take care of that.*" In essence, that would be saying, "*God, You better come through if you want me to have any real faith in You.*" That is testing God.

Problem Two: Jumping off the pinnacle to gain a following would be to abandon the mission — to become the one, substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Yes, hundreds, thousands, maybe millions would have come running to see the super showman who can float down to earth unscathed. But those hundred, thousands, millions, even billions would be trapped forever in the web of sin — which is precisely where Satan wants them.

So, it appears, that Satan decides to go for the big score. Forget that "***If you are the Son of God***" intro (it doesn't seem to have much impact anyhow); just go for what all humans seem to give in to: self.

*"Jesus, here's the deal. You come to me in homage ("Luke, Luke, come over to the dark side") and I will give you what your heart really desires: power, wealth, fame, and glory."* There is no invitation to join Satan in identifiable evil . . . Nothing is said about abusing puppies or tearing the wings off butterflies; there is no suggestion of entering into debauchery; no hurting others or ruining the planet; no crimes against humanity, embezzling, pedofilia — not even a hint of scatological language.

It's very simple and simply presented: "***All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.***" No big deal. No forms to sign. Not even a handshake required. Who'll know? Think of all that you could accomplish with this vast wealth at your disposal. The temptation has

shifted from identity to purpose. If you want to do great things for God, you will need this and I can provide it for you.

The author of Hebrews writes: “. . . *we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.*” [4.15] So we need to look at this narrative not just as an event in the life of Jesus, but to see how He was, in fact, **“in every respect has been tested as we are”** so that we can know how to face those same temptations.

These three episodes, therefore, become *types* — symbolic of a larger truth. We will face temptations that ask us to question who we are in relationship to God. We will face temptations that bid us to call into question what God has to say to us (underlying that is the temptation to ignore learning what God has to say). We will face temptations that invite us to sidestep what we clearly know God wants from our lives. We will face temptations that urge us to stand down because we think we lack the resources to do what God wants us to do.

It is that last one that strikes me as so insidious. Some years ago, at a conference at Ashland Seminary, one of the main speakers invited the participants to *“do great things for God.”* That’s a theme that is echoed often in some corners of the Church. But a follow-up speaker, Dr. Siang-Yang Tan, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and originally from Singapore, challenged that notion, suggesting it was a distinctly American idea and not in keeping with what Jesus taught. He suggested instead that we do the many little things that bring people to Christ — all of them involving interpersonal relationships that the Holy Spirit uses to spark new life in people. Since I cannot remember the name of the first speaker, it is clear that I sided with Dr. Tan.

When Jesus comes back at Satan a last time in this narrative, it is very instructive to us what we need to do what we are bidden down that road of “doing great things.” Listen to Jesus yet again: **“*Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’*”**

Worship: venerate, adore, bow before — the etymological background of the Greek word is “to kiss.” Serve: The Greek word is used throughout the New Testament with two primary accents: living sacrificially and praying. So, the “not great things” we should be about are: kiss God, serve the needs of others, pray.

You don’t need ***“all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor”*** to accomplish that. But you do need to be with Jesus, watching Him, emulating Him, following Him, relying on Him, living in Him.

Amen.