



*What Is Your Temptation?*

*Matthew 4:1-11*

*First Sunday in Lent, Sunday, March 1st, 2020*

*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*

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*Text: Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (v.1)*

What is your temptation? We all have them, you know.

My wife is fond of saying that we are not tempted by those things that we do not want. For example, if you are allergic to peanuts, you don't crave peanuts. If you don't like chocolate--that's almost Un-American--you cannot be tempted by either the first or last piece of chocolate cake.

In life I often major in the minor; it's the little things that attract my attention. As I read through this story a couple of peaked my curiosity.

First, it is the Spirit, the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism, that led him into the wilderness, the desert, that place where some enter and from which they never return. He was led into a dangerous and wild place.

Second, unlike every other event in the life of Jesus, with the exception of the Resurrection, there are no witnesses to what happened. Jesus is totally alone. Did Jesus later report what happened in the wilderness to his disciples or was the gospel writer telling us that, in the words of the letter to the Hebrews, "Jesus was tempted in every way just as we are tempted"? (Hebrews 4:15)

I believe that the gospel writers wanted to tell the faithful, then and now, those of us who take Jesus seriously, how to face our own temptations, our own spiritual battles. In other words, Jesus shows us the way.

The three temptations parallel the temptations that the Hebrews faced in the Exodus.

The first temptation asked, "Can I trust God to provide my daily bread?"

This temptation harkened back to Israel's complaint that God didn't care about them. In his last address before his death Moses reminded spoke to the assembled people and reminded them of God's mighty deeds of faithfulness.

Remember the whole way by which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness. (You) were afflicted with hunger and God fed you with manna to teach you that people do not live on bread alone, but that they live on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 8: 2&3, Revised English Bible)

If we live, we live unto the Lord, the apostle wrote, and if we die; we die unto the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord. (Romans 14:8)

“In life and in death, we belong to God.” (Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (USA))

I was in a book store yesterday looking for birthday gifts. I happened across a book by the late Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. It has been years since I read the book, a spiritual autobiography. One of the things that I remember most is her reflection on seeing sharecroppers come to her grandfather's supply store at the end of the day. She wrote:

“People whose history and future were threatened each day by extinction considered that it was only by divine intervention that they were able to live at all. I find it interesting that the meanest life, the poorest existence, is attributed to God's will, but as human beings become more affluent, as their living standard and style begin to ascend the material scale, God descends the scale of responsibility at a commensurate speed.”

- Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

The second temptation is reminiscent of Exodus 17. The people were thirsty and they complained to Moses, as if he could do anything about it.

“Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”

What could he say? Was he the only one who trusted God?

Moses cried to the Lord, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

God answered Moses, “Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.”

Moses did as God asked and water came out of the rock. Moses called that place Massah, which means “testing” because the Israelites tested God.

In an episode of the television series Code Black a physician is given a new perspective of life and of death by a patient who knows that he is dying.

“Humans want answers. But the answers that we need do not come with photographic evidence. They require you to believe in something you can't see. After all, that's why we call it faith. Otherwise we'd call it proof.”

Proof is easy; faith is hard.

*“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1)*

Jesus did not need to prove God's love and care to anyone, not even to himself. Neither do we. Our faith tells us that God is with us on life's mountaintops as well as the valley of the shadow of death. I do not know how many times I have heard a widow or widower say to me, “I don't know how people get through this if they don't have faith.”

As the old song says,

“There’s got to be a morning after

If we can hold on through the night

We have a chance to find the sunshine

Let’s keep on looking for the light. (The Morning After, lyrics by Maureen McGovern)

The third temptation is an ancient version of the Faustian story, *Metastrophalies*. You can have whatever your heart desires if you sell your soul to the devil.

In what I believe to be one of the saddest verses in Scripture the apostle wrote to Timothy these words: *“Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. (II Timothy 4:9&10)*

*What does it profit a person, Jesus asked, if they gain the whole world and lose their soul? (Matthew 16:26, Mark 8:36)*

On Ash Wednesday I noted that the columnist, best-selling author, and political commentator wrote that there are two kinds of virtues in life; Resume and Eulogy. Resume values that appear on a resume, the ones that the world thinks is important - being on the honor roll, the dean’s list, valedictorian, climbing the ladder of success, achieving a job title, the corner office, or becoming rich.

Eulogy values, though, are those that are remembered at your funeral. Were you loving, kind, generous, helpful. These are the values of Scripture, Kingdom values.

In this season of Lent we are challenged to develop Eulogy values; to trust that God will meet our daily needs, not our wants, but our needs; to have the faith that God is with us not just in the good times, the best of times, but in the worst of times, too; and to be careful lest we fall in love with the world.

These Eulogy values are what we witness as individuals commit to joining our fellowship, being baptized, and together as we share the Lord’s Supper.

To God be the glory. Amen.