

## **“Putting the Lord to the Test”**

Matthew 4:1-11

Sunday February 10, 2008, Lent 1A

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then 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.’” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Prayer.

Let us for a moment consider the hundreds of decisions we face every day, day in day out, 24-7 and 365. Every decision has a right choice, which I would suggest is the will of God. And every decision has one or more wrong choices, which are always temptations.

Temptation is the necessary requirement for having God’s gift of free choice. The privilege of following the will of God brings with it the responsibility of not yielding to temptation. If we want to live free, then we must face the fact that we must be free to fail.

And fail, we do. Each of us fail from time to time; choose the wrong choice, yield to temptation, knowing full well what we are doing is wrong. Sometimes the temptation is to do nothing, not following through with our responsibilities, failing to live up to our word. But

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other times, we yield to temptation for selfish or greedy reasons. Failure is a painful experience. It usually takes place in front of others. It breaks down the self-esteem. It destroys trust. It's a public confession that you've done wrong.

But even God can use the devil for His better purpose. Painful as it may be, failure is a great teacher. Failure brings with it opportunity; to learn and grow from the experience, to resolve not to make the same mistakes a second time. Our God doesn't write people off when they fail, when they fail to follow His ways.

God is always waiting, always watching, always patient for the sinner to repent and return. Obviously, don't fail for failure sake. Do the right thing; follow the will of God, always, everywhere, and without exception. But if you do fail, know that God forgives, God restores, and God saves. No one is written off in God's kingdom.

Temptation, and the free will to yield to it, is exactly what our scripture for today is addressing. In Genesis, God placed the man in the garden, told him to eat freely of every tree except one, "for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

**God tests, but Satan tempts.** I may be splitting hairs; but it is important to make the distinction. Tempting is the devil's business. A test gives the person the opportunity to choose what is right. The one giving the test hopes for success. But temptation is to entice a person to do wrong. The one making the temptation hopes for failure.

God is testing Adam and Eve. God has a long history of testing his faithful. God tested Abraham- to see if he was prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac. God tested the Hebrews in the wilderness- conditions where so poor, many grumbled that returning to slavery in Egypt might be better than their current state. God tested Job- a righteous and faithful man. God allows the beloved to choose good or evil, and hopes to bless the right choice.

Satan tempts the woman; in the form of a serpent, Satan offers what he is unable to give. "You will not die," he slithers, "for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." He is lying. We know it's a lie. Eating from the tree will not open her eyes, will not make her like God, will not allow

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her to know good or evil. Eating from the tree will only disappoint God, for it means that she failed the test. She failed to follow God's will.

Jesus is in a similar circumstances today. Following his baptism, Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days, a very long time. He had been led there by the Spirit, the very one who just descended upon him at his baptism. The Spirit didn't do the tempting. The Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness where he was tempted. The Spirit remained at his side, and ministered to him when the confrontation was over.

Jesus was in the wilderness to be hardened. It was a necessary thing, for Jesus to weather the storm. It is what made him fully human, as well as divine. A savior who cannot follow the will of God, who cannot stand up to the devil, who cannot endure our everyday temptation is a savior who cannot save us. Jesus squared off with the devil because he knew that you and I would have to face him in our lives today.

The devil attacks his weakest point- hunger, "command these stones to become loaves of bread." Bread is for the body, but the word of God is for the soul. Jesus quotes scripture, from Deuteronomy 8:3 "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus uses scripture, the word of God, the source of life, to repel Satan's attack.

God provides for our every bodily need- food, water, clothing and shelter. God's grace already cares for the body. But it is the word of God that gives us meaning and purpose.

The devil attacks a second time- a common trap that we face all the time: power and authority. Jesus is tempted to use wield the power of God for illicit ends. "Throw yourself down," the devil hisses, "for it is written 'He will command his angels... On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Imagine that, the devil is prone to quoting scripture. The good word of God is twisted by Satan for self serving and evil ends. Quoting scripture requires a pure heart.

Jesus responds to the second temptation with the word of God, citing Deuteronomy 6:16 "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Testing God is evidence of doubt. Testing God elevates the self to the same

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level as God, which of course, is idolatrous. It's one thing for God to test us; it is sinful and unfaithful to test God.

The devil attacks a third and final time; "All these (kingdom of the world) I will give you if you fall down and worship me." Hah! As if the kingdoms of this world were Satan's to give away. They are not.

There certainly are agents of evil in every country, but let there be no mistake, "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." This is God's earth, and we are His children.

"Away with you, Satan!" Jesus commands. For the third time, Jesus cites the word of God, this time from Deuteronomy 6:16 "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

What occupies the first priority in our lives, the focus of our worship? Where do we spend our time and money? As Christians, we spend our time and money following God's will for our lives, worshipping Him, and serving Him by serving others. We worship God, and God alone. "Away with you, Satan!" **we should be so quick to say**, then walk away.

My beloved, Jesus knows the trials and temptations we go through on a daily basis, because he was tempted in the wilderness by the devil, and at numerous other times in his ministry. God testing us is the necessary requirement for us to have free choice. God always wants us to succeed; to follow His will, to be faithful to His word, to repent and be restored when we have failed.

Temptation is always the work of the devil. It is his hope that we will make the wrong choice and to fall. The devil will employ great effort; will lie, cheat, steal, even quote you scripture in an attempt to lead you wrong.

What ever your temptation might be, alcohol, drugs, adultery, gambling, stealing, lying, cheating, whatever- Know that the word of God is your best defense. Command the temptation, and the tempters, in your life to leave. Turn your back on them and walk away.

When you turn your back on sin and temptation, when you walk away from the devil, you will find yourself walking towards Jesus. Amen.

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