

### **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.

## **Temptations** - February 26, 2023

*Matthew 4:1-11*

As we begin this season of Lent, I would like to take a moment to clarify what this time is about. Traditionally, Lent has been a somber time in our Christian faith. After all, although we Protestants typically don't commemorate the Lenten season in the same manner as our Roman Catholic friends — I, for one, have never deliberately given up meat on Fridays — we know enough that we are aware that Lent customarily involved our “giving up” something. We give up something, something that we enjoy, as a kind of sacrifice. The idea behind giving up something is that it involves a deliberate choice. We feel the urge to eat, or drink, or go out, and nowadays play video games and send social media posts, and we deliberately deny ourselves that pleasure.

When we choose to deny ourselves pleasure, it is supposed to somehow make us think about our relationship with God. While I understand the theory, it kind of makes God out to be a rather glum deity who gave us access to pleasurable things, but doesn't want us to have them. According to this view, the motto of Lent seems to be: look, but don't touch.

This is a rather backdoor way of building our relationship with God. It claims that the best way to get close to God by depriving ourselves. The intention is that we are supposed to think “holy thoughts” instead of earthly ones because in God's supposed plan, we're really not supposed to have fun.

Now I fully agree that the point of Lent is to help us build our relationship with God. I encourage all of us to devote significant time every day to prayer and study. I encourage everyone to spend at least 15 minutes in total silence, getting away from all distractions, and just thinking and praying about our lives and asking God to fill us with the Holy Spirit. Moreover, we should get into the habit of just listening, listening, for the voice of God guiding us on what to do. You may not hear it at first, but over time, you will. Our daily online prayer and Taizé services are designed to do just that.

But during this time of self-reflection and spiritual renewal, I would propose that instead of denying ourselves of something to remind us of God, that we instead remember and celebrate the many gifts that God has given us. Each day, I encourage you to choose to remember just one way God has blessed you over the course of your life. Whether it is for our health, or relationships, or community, or opportunities, we have been richly blessed but so often take what we have been given for granted. Instead of pursuing the traditional approach, I encourage us all to use Lent to draw closer to God by thanking God for how God is working alongside us right now — and all the thinking, praying, silence, and celebration will lead to our celebrating the greatest gift of all: the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on Easter. Lent should not be seen as season of gloom, rather, Lent is a season of joy!

So as we move toward the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, we start by recalling his earthly journey to the cross, to the grave, and joyfully, the empty tomb.

Today we recall that before Jesus began preaching and calling followers, he put himself through a time of preparation. He knew the message he was bringing the world would be simultaneously powerful and controversial. He knew that before he opened his mouth there would be massive opposition to what he had to say. He knew that the journey was risky and dangerous and that at some point, he would die. And all along, he knew that he would be tempted endlessly to use his abilities in ways they should not be used which would only glorify himself instead of God.

So to discover for himself, personally, whether he was up to the task of bringing the Good News to the world, Jesus deliberately tested himself to build the inner strength he would need for the difficult journey that lay ahead.

It makes good sense, doesn't it? I mean as we reflect on our lives, especially during this period of Lent, I know every one of us has been tempted and tested. We have all faced hard times and challenges whether it is in our health, our relationships, our work, or our security. And I believe that most if not all of us would declare that while we did not enjoy these challenges and would not want to repeat them, we also realize that the difficulties and struggles we have endured have made us stronger, better, and more faithful — because at the end of it all, we know that we endured, survived, and triumphed because of our relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

A quintessentially Russian saying from the playwright Anton Chekov goes, "Only during hard times do people come to understand how difficult it is to be master of their feelings and thoughts." I believe that is why Jesus subjected himself to this time of temptation, so he would know to the core of his being that he was up to the challenge.

In our scripture, we learn of three ways Jesus experienced temptation. But why do we call what he experienced "temptation"? I mean that we can easily appreciate that after all he had been through — the fasting and heat and wind and desolation — it would be understandable that he would want to create some food for himself, get some control and power in his chaotic world, and ignore the God whom he was sent to proclaim and just let something else be in charge. After all he experienced, why try? Why bother? Why not just give up and give in? After all, every one of us in this room has given into temptation not once but daily. That's why we begin our time of worship with a Prayer of Confession which says to God bluntly: we have tried and we have failed to be the people You, God, created us to be.

Yet the question remains, how do we define temptation? One way to look at it is that temptation is any action or even thought that rejects the fundamental message that informed everything Jesus

said and did: Jesus told us that core of his ministry was to encourage everyone to Love God, and Love your neighbor as yourself.

Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. That's it, friends. That's what Jesus is telling us over and over again.

On the surface, it seems very simple, doesn't it? Following Jesus just means loving God and loving your neighbors. Easy? Of course not. If it were easy, the world would be perfect. Hint: the world is not perfect so it follows that we are failing as individuals and as the human community to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. Each of the three temptations Jesus faced then — and we face today — unquestionably violates what Jesus taught us. Jesus therefore could not tell us to Love God unless He loved God, utterly, unceasingly, and unquestionably. Jesus likewise could not tell us to Love our Neighbors unless He love His neighbors, utterly, unceasingly, and unquestionably.

Let's start with the first temptation: The tempter tells the famished Jesus to end his hunger by turning the stones around him into bread. If you go to Israel and see the wilderness Jesus saw in person, you immediately notice that the stones literally look like little loaves of bread scattered all over the place. But, if Jesus had turned stones to bread, as he knew he could have, he would be using his power to serve only himself. Such a selfish use of his power meant that 1) he was valuing his need for material things — in this case, food — more that his need for God and 2) he was disregarding his neighbors by filling his stomach when he knew of the suffering in the world.

What drives us? What motivates our decisions and actions? As humans, we are conditioned to always act in our own self-interest, or perhaps the interest of our families and sometimes country. We look out for number one. Perhaps our actions benefit others, but the world teaches that is irrelevant. By refusing to turn stones into bread, Jesus puts the interests and benefits of all people on the same level as his own. He chooses not to put himself first, but God first and others ahead of him. He chooses to starve and trust God to provide for him rather that use his power for his own benefit.

Jesus then experiences a second temptation, one we are also very familiar with. The tempter encourages Jesus to use his authority to test God, forcing God to act by intervening and preventing Jesus from injuring himself by jumping off the temple. This, again, is a temptation we give into all time. Don't we, in our prayers and actions, constantly reveal how little we trust God to guide us though life? In the Lord's Prayer, we say, "Thy will be done." But do we really trust that God's will and God's plans are the same as ours? Do we not instead dream up imaginary wants and needs and act in a way that expects God to agree with us? This is what the tempter was telling Jesus, "Go

ahead and jump, and God will make it all right for you. Jump, even though you don't need to, and God will be there. Jump and prove that you can control God.”

Yes, imagine, us controlling God. Us, bending God's will to our own. Us, telling God what to do. Yet, so often, that is exactly what we do when we substitute our will for God's will. How can that possible be loving our God? Obviously, it can't, yet we do it all the time.

Finally, Jesus was tempted to grab some earthly power for himself. All he had to do was reject God and worship Satan. That's all, just a little thing like that. Of course that is not loving God. But it's also not loving neighbors. Too often, we view the world strictly in terms of winners and losers. There can be no such thing as a win-win situation. Power, in the world's view, exists only to build ourselves up, and necessarily tear others down. Satan asked Jesus to exalt Himself at the expense of others. If he did so, Jesus would indeed be worshipping evil, because all evil stems from putting our personal desires ahead of everyone else's and doing whatever we must do to get what we want.

We don't have to want to rule the entire world, as Satan was asking Jesus to do. No, all we have to do is desire to force others to do what we want in a way that brings them down and builds us up. Power, in human thought exists solely for the sake of power.

Power does exist and we all have power, whether we admit it or not. Every one of us has enormous power should we choose to use it. We all can make the world better — not necessarily on a huge scale, but on a very human scale. We can touch our neighbor's lives in so many ways. We can be a voice for the voiceless. We can make choices that bring good into the world and fight evil. We can all do these things, but only if we want to. The power we have is the power of love. The power the tempter offered Jesus was the opposite of love. Satan offered Jesus only the power of selfishness — and Jesus refused.

What are the choices you will make during this time of Lent? Will you choose to glorify God by Loving God more and more every day, or will you love only yourself more and more every day? Will you figure out new and better ways to love and serve your neighbor, or will you devote your time and energy to serving only yourself?

These are the temptations we face daily. Lent offers us the opportunity to get closer to God by celebrating what God does for us every day. The more we realize what God does for us, the more we can resist temptation and follow Jesus. Have a blessed Lent!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.