



“The Choices We Make”

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

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January 20, 2019

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

The great 20th century theologian, Archie Bunker, once defined faith as “something that no one in their right mind would ever believe.” Those words came back to me this week as I wrestled with the story of Jesus’ temptation. There is so much about this story that stretches the bounds of credibility.

If, like me, you’ve been around the church for a while, you’ve heard this story presented as history - as biography - as factual data. That’s how I heard it for a very long time.

The wilderness, for example, sounded like pre-pioneer Indiana, where, it was said, a squirrel could run across the state without its feet ever touching the ground. The wilderness sounded like forests and underbrush and people hacking their way through with machetes. Then I went to Israel. It couldn’t have been less of what I had imagined. The wilderness was sand, and rocks, and very little else. It was desolation - bleakness - an arid, inhospitable place, inhabited by scorpions and snakes. A squirrel wouldn’t last a day there.

Then, there’s the whole forty days piece of the puzzle. Forty pops up all through the Bible and rarely in a good way. Forty days and nights of rain as the flood covered the earth. Forty years of Israel wandering in the wilderness. Oh, there’s the wilderness again. Jesus is in the wilderness fasting for forty days and nights. Not much of a connection with Noah and the Ark, but what a connection with the story of Israel being led throughout the wilderness, facing times of testing and trials to discover what it means to be God’s people. Forty days and nights of fasting to discover what it means to be God’s person - that’s pretty good.

Maybe these stories that challenge us do so because we read them too literally. Maybe the best way to come at these stories of Jesus - particularly in the Gospel of Matthew - is by reading them symbolically and metaphorically. The ancient rabbis had a genre they called *mishnah*. Jesus taught in parables, as we will see throughout the weeks of February and March. What if we viewed this very unusual story through the lens of parable?

For reasons he can't explain, other than a feeling - a prodding - a leading - he goes into the wilderness, Jesus enters into the ancient spiritual discipline of fasting. Fasting has often been a spiritual method for discerning God's direction - God's purpose. Jesus fasted for a long time - a time that prepared him to face extraordinarily important questions - questions designed to clarify his identity, his purpose, and his calling. This time in the wilderness was a time of discovery - a spirit quest - a holy moment.

Presumably, when he was weakened and opened to the power of suggestion, the ideas and images begin to emerge. The gospel speaks of "the devil" and "the tempter." This is evil given personification. This is the presence of the way that is not God's way. This is the powers and pressures that lead us away from being who God created us to be.

Both Matthew and Luke tells us that Jesus faced three temptations, even if they offer them in different orders. The round rocks of the wilderness look like loaves of round bread. "Command these stones to become loaves of bread." After forty days and nights without bread, the idea of bread must have sounded really good. "Have a nibble," the voice says. "What could it hurt?"

Then, Jesus sees himself at the highest point of the Temple, overlooking the Temple courts and the Kidron Valley beyond. "Jump off," the voice says, "and let everyone see the angels of God catch you." "Put on a little show - a little demonstration of who you are and what God will do for you. What could it hurt?"

Finally, Jesus imagines himself at a very high spot and laid out like a rug before him are all the kingdoms of the world - a feasible idea when you don't know the earth is round. "If you abandon this thing you've got going with God," the voice says, "you can have it all." "A little compromise and the world can be yours. What could it hurt?"

Now, Matthew churches it up a bit and has Jesus respond by quoting Scripture verses back to the voice, but that's just a stained glass way of saying that Jesus didn't give in to the voice. That voice of temptation was not as strong as the Voice that was heard at Jesus' baptism, that proclaimed, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." I can tell you, as a parent, that if that Voice was pleased at the time of the baptism, it was even more pleased at the end of the trial and temptation. Who Jesus was had been put to the test and he passed with flying colors.

When you start poking around in some of the lesser known books of the New Testament, you sometimes find a little passage - or a verse - that jumps off the page and sticks with you. One such verse came back to me as I thought about this story. You find it in the Letter to the Hebrews. In the fourth chapter, the fifteenth verse, we read:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”

Jesus - our high priest, in the language of the Letter to the Hebrews - was tempted and tried in every way that you and I are tempted and tried. The only difference is that Jesus did not yield to the voice that called him to walk a way that was not God’s way. Jesus withstood making the wrong choices. Jesus was able to stay God’s person through it all.

That has nothing to do with Jesus’ divinity. Jesus couldn’t cave in to the trial or the test because he was God. This has everything to do with Jesus’ humanity. Being “fully human” he could have responded to the voice inviting him to turn stones into bread. Being “fully human” he could have put on a religious display for those near the Temple. Being “fully human” he could have answered the invitation to power. It is precisely because Jesus was “fully human” that this story is told. It is because Jesus is “fully human” - just like the rest of us - that we recount Jesus ignoring the invitation to walk away from God’s path and remaining fatally faithful to God.

Which means, we need to learn the lesson Jesus lived.

The temptation to self-satisfaction is ever before us. Have you ever noticed that the moment you commit to watching your diet, you find yourself in situations where the most luscious foods are available? Have you ever noticed that when you make the decision to give up television for a while, there’s always a program that you would really enjoy? Have you ever noticed that when you are speaking in public the need to cough becomes more real? (That one was for me.)

Meeting our own desires, wants, and needs keeps us from even recognizing the genuine needs of another. While we muse over which restaurant in which we will choose to dine, we fail to even think about the hungry and how, what we overspend on ourselves, might be better used to feed those without food. In our lives of excess and overindulgence, we fail to meet the challenge of being God’s people and “loving our neighbor as ourselves.” In our immoderation with matters financial, in our intemperance surrounding possessions and belongings, in our pursuit of instant gratification, it is so easy to forget the way of discipleship, the pathway of living as God’s people, and do exactly what we want to do exactly because we can. When tempted to think first of ourselves, we too often answer “yes” to that invitation.

When tempted to put God to the test, we will sometimes ease our conscience by saying, “If God wants that to happen it’s up to God.” I will take no responsibility. I will initiate no action. I will not accept any blame or accountability. I’ll leave it up to God.

Think of the “foxhole” deal. We’re in the worst predicament we can imagine - more often than not of our own making - and we cry out to God, “If you just get me out of this one, I promise...” There’s more than a little desperation there, but there’s also more than enough putting God to the test there as well. “I don’t wear a seat belt because God will take care of me.” What? “I won’t study for that test, because God will give me the answers I need.” Good luck with that. “I’m not going to make any move toward rectifying that situation because God will put things right.” Uh-huh.

When coaxed into amassing power for ourselves, of any kind, we feel the nudge. If I just compromise my core connection to God and the gospel, I can really be somebody. If I just swallow my pride and give in a little, I can look a little better in the eyes of all. If I cut a few corners, take something that no one will notice, climb down of my moral high horse, I can have this or I can be that. But, more often than not, that means abandoning God’s way, drying off the waters of our baptism, and learning to say, with Peter the fisherman/disciple, “Jesus? Never heard of him.”

Times of trial and testing our mettle as God’s people come with amazing regularity. Opportunities to walk away from the promises we have made to God and to ourselves follow the course of the sun and moon across the skies.

The good news is that we are stronger than we realize. If Jesus was tempted in every way that we are and could stay faithful, we can stay faithful too. The same power that sustained Jesus in the wilderness sustains us in the wilderness of our world. The same power that enabled Jesus to endure is with us and can empower our endurance. The same presence that accompanied Jesus through his wilderness journey is with us on our expedition through life.

And when we fail, when we succumb to the enticing voice that would lead us in a direction other than God’s, there is mercy and grace. Taken together, the fifteenth and sixteenth verses of the fourth chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews tell us:

For 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. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Mercy and grace in time of every need.

It’s about the choices we make. Choices have consequences - some good, some not so good. The well-worn maxim tells us that life is the result of the choices we make. Discipleship is the result of the voices we choose to follow.

That being said, “choose wisely.” For now and evermore. Amen.