

“Truly Tempted”  
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia  
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Matthew 4: 1 – 11

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. <sup>3</sup>And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” <sup>4</sup>But he answered, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’”

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” <sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’”

<sup>8</sup>Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; <sup>9</sup>and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to him, “Begone, Satan! for it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’”

<sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.

In the book entitled “Sleeping with Bread,” the authors write:<sup>1</sup>

During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, some- one hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, “Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow.”

I’m sure that there is more than one person in this sanctuary today who knows that hunger is real. Who knows what it is to not have enough food on the table, who knows what a grumbling stomach can lead you to do.

It’s not when we are at our strength that we are most likely to cave to our less-noble impulses it’s when we are weak.

It’s why fasting has been used as a time to break through to the truth of who we are. Who we are when other things are stripped away.

The temptation of Jesus is real. His hunger is real. This is no imaginary exercise or one of Aesop’s fables, Jesus is being tempted. He must make real choices about who and whose he is, whose will he will serve.

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Linn, Shelia Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn, Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life, Mahwah/New York: Paulist Press, 1995. Page 1.

The devil,<sup>2</sup> an unseen force throughout Matthew who makes his one clear appearance here, isn't challenging whether or not Jesus is the Son of God, he is challenging what it **means** to be the Son of God. What is the nature of Messiah? Is the Messiah a triumphant warrior or a suffering servant? Is the Messiah a winning lottery ticket or a new pair of glasses that changes the way you see and understand the world? Peace through compassion, abundance through simplicity.

First, the devil tells Jesus to turn the stones to bread. Jesus is hungry. Jesus performs miracles like this at other times. There isn't anything inherently wrong in Jesus doing this. But the devil isn't encouraging Jesus to break his fast here, he tells Jesus to change the stones -plural- into bread. In other words, this is more than what Jesus needs, this is in order to feed the world. Is the Son of Man the one who will bring back the reign of manna when all of the needs of the people were miraculously met by God? Some people would have said yes, that's what they were expecting. Jesus says No. The son of Man is the one who comes to show us that the earth provides us with enough food. When we trust God's abundance, there is enough to feed the world. Jesus is not here to give us miracles in order to solve the problem of hunger, he is here to show us that solving the problem of hunger is a matter of trust and stewardship. If we allow our souls to be completely nourished by God then we will find ways to make sure all bodies are also nourished. Faith leads to action. God will do what we cannot, God will not do what we can. Jesus will not perform this miracle.

Next, Jesus is taken to the highest point on a temple. Jump off, the devil says. Trust that God your Father will take care of you. Jesus answered the previous dilemma with trust, so the devil now challenges him to prove that trust. But what is the point? Is Jesus truly in jeopardy? The problem is not that God is unwilling to help. As soon as this encounter with the devil is over we are told that the angels come to attend to Jesus. Angels have already protected Jesus from the murderous intentions of King Herod. The problem isn't that Jesus is uncomfortable receiving the help of angels. But what would be the point of Jesus jumping off? It would be only an act of glory, an act to bring glory and attention to himself, and that is not the goal of the Messiah. Jesus is not here to glorify himself, he is here to glorify, point the way, to God. Jesus will not jump.

One more temptation. The devil offers Jesus power to rule the world. Jesus could make all of the changes that he wants to make. It would be so much easier. If Jesus wants to change the world here is a way to do it. But the Messiah has not come to rule, the Messiah has come to serve. Not to change the world but to help the world be changed. To show the way. To **be** the way of faithfulness. True power is not domination, being able to order what you want, true power is being able to be what you want. Jesus will not accept the devil's offer.

Jesus could have done any and all of these things. It was within his ability. It was within his right. He chose not to do so for the same reason God chose not to use plague or flood this time to make His will known. God had tried those things, and they had not worked. They had not brought everlasting peace or justice. And so God did the only thing left. The greatest thing. God became fully human, submitting to the limitations of humanity and the limitations of the human heart. God sought to conquer us not with power but with mercy, generosity, honesty, and complete vulnerability. The human heart reciprocated this gift with crucifixion, and even that God defeated- not through removing Jesus from the cross but through the power of resurrection.

What does this have to say for our lives? Quoting the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary: "To the extent that Jesus' temptation serves as a model for Christians, it might teach us that to be a 'child of

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the ideas upon which this sermon are based are found in Eugene Boring, "Matthew," The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995.

God' means to have a trusting relationship to God that does not ask for miraculous exceptions to the limitations of an authentic human life."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus finally sends the devil away, and he is finally ready to break his fast and leave the wilderness for the work that is ahead. Jesus has not defeated the devil, he has rendered him irrelevant, a flame extinguished because it has been starved for oxygen. Jesus' dependence on God is so complete that there is no room for anything else.

In our own temptations, we are in the same situation, Jesus instructs us here not to fight, but to turn the other way.

It may be the toughest lesson to learn of all, because most of us would rather fight. We would rather be right. Feel triumphant. But when we do, we proclaim that our temptations are worthy opponents, that in some way opinions other than God's matter.

And the only way to truly get away from our own temptations is to do what Jesus did, turn unto God. To recognize that church is not just something nice but that gathering with the community of believers is as essential as the air we breathe. Bible study is not just something we hope we have time for, it is the difference between assurance and despair. Communion is not just a pleasant refreshment, it is the nourishment without which our souls wither and die.

Jesus has not defeated the devil, he has rendered him irrelevant, a flame extinguished because it has been starved for oxygen. Jesus' dependence on God is so complete that there is no room for any other opinion.

A few years ago, a friend of mine, Jan Edmiston, a Presbyterian minister who is currently one of the moderators of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) denomination surprised her daughter with a trip to New York City. Some of the things that happened on this trip surprised both of them. This is how Jan tells the story<sup>4</sup>:

[Our trip] started and ended with food, but not the food one might expect...  
No Zabar's. No Carmine's.

[I surprised my daughter in the morning and] We vamoosed it to NYC and eventually missed dinner before the play because we miscalculated the time. Woke up the next morning dreaming about Real Bagels for breakfast..., and so our search began. But we were distracted and by the time we found any bagel spot at all - much less a great one - it was almost time to leave town. We grabbed a quick snack (leftover Reese's Pieces from play and a pretzel so stale the vendor didn't charge me) and hopped on the bus for the return home - exhausted but happy and reassured that the bus would make the usual stop at a... rest stop halfway home.

But then we both got a surprise: the bus driver ... had no intention of stopping at any rest stop. Yikes. So, there we were, a little hungry...

And by the time we'd been in that bus for almost four hours, I was starting to claw at the windows every time we passed a Roy Rogers.

So, [we] developed a plan. When the bus stopped in Bethesda to drop off the Maryland passengers, I would sprint to the Starbucks across from the stop, grab a couple sandwiches (no time for coffee) and hightail it back before it drove away. I was literally standing up ready to be the first one off the bus when Mr. I'll-Drop-Them- Off - When -and -Where- I- Want- Bus Driver parked a full two blocks away from Starbucks

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Boring, "Matthew," The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995, 166

<sup>4</sup> Jan Edmiston rocks! <http://www.achurchforstarvingartists.com/2008/05/take-eat.html>

and [my daughter] was concerned I would not make it back in time. So we ditched the quick sandwich plan.

Little did we know, our silly window clawing and conversation about how a stale Starbucks muffin was sounding pretty good had been noticed by our fellow travelers. Almost as soon as I sat back down, the woman behind us said, "I've got an extra Luna Bar. Would you like it?" Before we could say, "Wow, thanks" another traveler had dropped a baggie full of goldfish crackers into my lap on his way off the bus. "I'd love you to have these," he said. And then before we processed this quick act of kindness, another woman handed us a granola bar. Suddenly we had a feast. Our own fish and loaves...

It was a feast. A feast that they celebrated. A feast that would never have happened without their fast.

And so it is for us, in Lent. May it be for us. That this season is one in which the peripherals, the unnecessaries are stripped away so that we, too, might have renewed clarity about the founder of our journey and the one with who we make this journey.

What are your struggles? What are your temptations?

The desire to be needed.

An addiction to busyness that prevents rest.

The falsehood of self-sufficiency.

The relationship that can't seem to, and might not be able to, get back on track.

Direction that seems nowhere to be found.

Fear.

Dis-ease.

Loneliness.

What is in your wilderness?

May we, by what we learn, also be those who starve evil of its oxygen, our love of God, our care for neighbor, so complete there is room for nothing else. For it is only then that we are truly free to follow Jesus to Jerusalem.

Amen.