

Matthew 4:1-17
Facing our Temptations
WRCoB 1.15.23

Ok, so I gained a few pounds over the holidays.

It happens every year.

It'll take this month

To get back down to where I want to be.

Not a big deal, I know, but still.

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I mean, seriously, it's all so tempting.

What with all the big dinner and breakfast events
From Thanksgiving through Christmas Day

From all the extras we get during the holidays
The pies, the cookies, the fudge.

And with multiple family gatherings
A whole lot of eating is going on.

I love it.

But at times, I want to say
"Get thee behind me, Satan!"

Because the problem is, I have no self-control.

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Oscar Wilde said, "*I can resist anything except temptation.*"

And Mae West also said, "*I generally avoid temptation unless I can't resist it.*"

So, let's talk about temptation.

What is it that tempts you?

That extra slice of pie?

The temptation to just charge it on the credit card?

Or to binge-watch a Netflix show

When other obligations call you?

Let's talk about some of the more serious temptations.

Alcohol, recreational drugs, pornography, gambling,

Various other addictions

Including, BTW, workaholism.

We can talk about these kinds of temptations.

They're serious in nature

Causing unhealthy and dysfunctional lifestyles.

But let's talk about the more sinister temptations.

Those that alter the core of our being.

Those are the kind Jesus faced in our lesson today.

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Our Scripture Lesson is Jesus in the wilderness.

Jesus' 40 days

Coincides with Israel's 40 years in the wilderness.

It was a period of testing.

Perhaps the only difference between them

Was the one doing the testing.

The 40 years of wandering in the wilderness

God tested the Israelites to prepare them.

The 40 days Jesus was in the wilderness
It was the devil testing him.

Sometimes it is difficult to figure out who is testing you.

The devil tempts us to tear us down
But God tests us to build us up.

What is interesting to note in verse 1 is that
It was the Spirit who led Jesus
To be tempted by the devil.

Which to me is completely confounding!

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Now temptations come to all of us.
This we know.

Even to those godly saints.

Being tempted, however, is not the sin.

As we see here, even Jesus was tempted.

It is the giving-in to temptation which is the sin.

And in our lesson today
Jesus successfully fended off the devil's temptations.

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Today, we find Jesus, still wet from his baptism
Venturing out into the wilderness alone
For a time to discern God's will.

It's a good thing to do.

To go out into the wilderness alone for a time of discernment

Moses, Joseph, Elijah, Paul, as well as Jesus all did it.

All of them experienced the temptations and lessons
Learned by time alone with God.

Here Jesus fasts and prays
As he faces the harsh conditions of the desert.

After forty days and nights, close to delirium
The tempter's voice begins to haunt him.

Now let's not get hung up on the scene before us.

If you were a cartoonist and asked to draw the scene

You'd likely draw Jesus kneeling over a rock praying
And the devil behind him whispering in his ear.

The devil, of course, is red with horns and a tail
And carries a forked staff.

I mean, everyone knows what a devil looks like, right?

You ever been confronted and tempted by one of them?

Neither have I.

I'm not denying the reality of external forces of evil.

Certainly not!

However, I believe most temptations come from within.

This is what James tells us.

James 1:14-15 NLT

¹⁴ Temptation comes from our OWN desires, which entice us and drag us away. ¹⁵ These desires give birth

to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.

No, I believe Jesus is alone.

With his own thoughts, with his own prayers
And with his own temptations.

This is not an easy, around the campfire,
Singing Kum Ba Yah, kind of experience.

Jesus has not eaten for 40 days and nights.

Personally, it's hard for me to skip one meal
Let alone, 120 meals.

He reaches the end of his strength.

He hears the tempter's challenge
"Why not turn these stones into bread?"

Actually, after what Jesus has just gone through
And being the Son of God and everything
It's not an unreasonable request.

No temptation initially is.

Why not? It's been 40 days.

And the voice within again saying
"Throw yourself down, God will save you."
"Prove who you are!"

Again, not unreasonable.

It is tempting.

The voice within him becomes louder.

It fills his mind until it almost possesses him.

“Jesus, you can have all of it.

All the kingdoms of the world can be yours.

“Bow down and worship me!”

Our lesson ends with Jesus successfully fighting off the devil
And comforted by a host of angels.

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We’re not talking about an extra piece of pie here.

We’re talking about something more menacing
More evil, more consequential.

We’re talking about the temptations people face
As they take positions of leadership.

The devil is tempting Jesus to see
What kind of leader he would be.

Would he be self-serving
As evident in turning stone to bread
Or using God’s angels to save him from a fall?

Would he end up worshiping power and position?

Would he develop a sense of grandiosity?
End up narcissistic?

Would he become so egotistical and self-absorbed
That everything he did
Even in the name of goodness
Would really be a guise for self-glory.

The temptation here is as old as humankind
It is the temptation to become like God.

The very same temptation that tempted Eve.

To replace God with self
The most damning of temptations.

We left that extra piece of pie long ago.

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We know the rest of the story.

Jesus leaves the wilderness empowered.

He builds the kingdom of God
From the grassroots on up
Rather than from the top down.

He proves his leadership skills
By becoming a servant/leader
Becoming an example everyone should follow.

He never put anyone down
Never did anything to prove his power
In fact, quite the opposite.

He always reached out to the poor and marginalized
The down-hearted and broken.

Jesus builds the kingdom of God
Through a sacrificial, unconditional love
For all peoples, great and small.

And in the end when he was arrested and tried
When he could have called upon
That host of angels to save him

When he could have called down lightning bolts.

He didn't

Instead, he allowed himself to be scorned
Tortured, hung on a cross til death
Seemingly a beaten and broken spirit.

Jesus gave every ounce of his being
To live and to die
To show the world the love of God.

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.Certainly, wilderness experiences can be literal.

To be alone in nature for extended periods of time.

But it can also be a metaphor
For those challenging times in our lives.

But all wilderness experiences have common elements.
Whether it is hiking the AT
Picking up the pieces of a broken life
Or a forty-day-fast-and-pray event.

The first common similarity
Is that the wilderness is a place of separation.

It is a place disconnected from the normal routines of life

It is a place where, like Jacob
You wrestle with your demons.

The wilderness is filled with uncertainties.

So that one's focus becomes directed to God

It is a time to meet your maker.

God reveals himself in the wilderness.

God pulls you away from competing voices

So that God's voice gets heard.

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The wilderness is also a place of preparation.

It is a place that when you go in thinking one way
You come out thinking another.

It is a place of discernment.

It is a place of assessment
Reviewing life's choices and consequences.

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And the wilderness is a place of enlightenment.

Moses led his people into the wilderness.

He left his people to be alone on Mt Sinai

A wilderness within a wilderness.

However, there on Mt Sinai
God revealed the way the people should go.

The wilderness then, is

- A place of separation
- A place of preparation
- And a place of revelation.

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Facing our own temptations
Fighting our own temptations
Overcoming our own temptations

Begins and ends with God.

We can learn from Jesus how to face our temptations.

Jesus prayed
Jesus fasted
Jesus quoted Scripture

All vital steps in the victory over temptations

The thing to remember in facing temptation
Is that it's not what you gain
By giving into temptation
But what you lose.

The serpent gave a small piece of fruit to Eve
And then took away Paradise.

And so, whether the temptation is for the key lime pie
Or the too expensive pair of shoes

Whether it is alcoholism, gambling, infidelity
Or the inflated view of self-importance

Jesus gave us the necessary tools
To overcome any and all temptations.

Rick Warren

Every time you defeat a temptation, you become more like Jesus!

F. B. Meyer

Temptation may even be a blessing to [someone] when it reveals to him his weakness and drives him to the almighty Savior.

Let us also come to the Lord for strength.