

Matthew 4:1-11

⁴Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying 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.’” ⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

For these Lenten days of reflection; for these days of lengthening light; for the guidance of your holy Word, we give you thanks Lord Jesus. Amen.

On the surface, this passage seems to be about Jesus being tested. Is Jesus really up to being God’s Messiah? Is Jesus prepared to completely embody God in the world in order to save the world from destruction; that is, self-destruction.

In truth, Jesus’ temptations express the very heart and soul of what it means to be *in* the world, *but not of the world*; it is to understand that our relationship with God determines our relationship to everything else. In truth, the quality of our relationship with God can make all the difference in how we live *in* the world. Will our relationship to the world be one that is life-giving – manifesting the kingdom of heaven – or life-draining, and a burden on God’s creation?

To be sure, Jesus’ temptations – the tests he endured in the wilderness – are *our* temptations and tests, for they are really about choosing who we will follow...God, or the world. But it is not exactly an either/or kind of thing. As Christians we believe that our choosing God is the *very best way* we can be in the world, to prosper the world, and all of creation, for the sake of all people, indeed, all living things.

I now feel that recognizing these temptations consciously and personally is one of our most important spiritual accomplishments

for us who claim to follow Christ, and affirm our identity as Christians.

Choosing and serving Christ is not something we do sitting in a rocking chair; choosing and serving Christ is not the default position! Jesus’ temptations make that clear. We must choose who we serve, and to whom do we give our utmost devotion and faithfulness. I’m remembering Bob Dylan’s lyrics to his ballad, *Gotta Serve Somebody*:

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

What I find most fascinating about the way Matthew detailed Jesus’ wilderness experience, is that it models Moses time during those 40 years of wandering in the wilderness with the people of Israel. Moses also endured 3 trying times: the order and type of Moses’ trials clearly mirror the temptations Jesus faced.

First, the people were hungry and complained to Moses that they had no food; Jesus was famished and tempted to make loaves of bread out of stones.

Second, the people complained to Moses because they had no water. You’ll remember how Moses struck the rock with his staff and water came forth. Moses called that place Massah (meaning *test*) and Meribah (meaning *quarrel*) because “the Israelites quarreled and **tested** the Lord.” Jesus second temptation was to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple, and let God’s angels catch him. Jesus’ response: *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*

And finally, when Moses was on the mountain for 40 days without eating and drinking, he received the 10 Commandments. The people became restless while he was away, and tired of waiting, so they called on Aaron to create a golden calf for them to worship. And as we know, Jesus refused to bow down to the tempter saying, *Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.*

Thus anchored in the Old Testament in the person of Moses, the temptations of Jesus establish a teaching of paramount importance for us today, and powerfully link us to the faith of our Jewish sisters

and brothers, from which Christianity was born. Our scriptures call us to see how these three temptations are universal and ever-present.

Again, in the first test Jesus was tempted to be *of* the world by putting himself first. When we are motivated by selfish appetites and desires, we too are putting ourselves first.

Putting God to the test is another way to put ourselves first, indeed, making ourselves more important than God.

Worshipping other gods is really worshipping the gods of power, the gods of status, and the gods of material gain, which again is how we put ourselves first, and above others. In the world we are bombarded everyday by messages about how we can be better, stronger, more important, more attractive, and have all we want. This is the tempter talking, leading us into idolatry.

Unfortunately, putting ourselves first will always fail us in the quest for meaning, and for a fulfilling experience of life. Putting ourselves first is a vain attempt to fill a void in us that only God can fill. So I offer the following image to try on to see if it might ring true for you.

Imagine that we are all born with a God-sized hole in our hearts. That hole creates a longing in us for there is something missing. We can spend our whole life trying to fill that hole, or trying to ignore or deny the longing the hole creates in us. There is only one thing that can fill that hole and satisfy our longing, and that is God.

Do you have those moments when you feel like something is missing, but you just can't quite put your finger on it? The world cannot fill this hole, this God-shaped hole. Yet we can spend so much of our life pushing aside this subtle ache that is always with us. Can we even count all the ways we have tried to satisfy this longing? Perhaps if we just got the right job, or the right partner, or the right home, or the right friends, or the right car, we would finally feel fulfilled.

But if we are looking out there – if we are looking to the world to fulfill us – we will ultimately be disappointed. We have all tried! We have all tried to satisfy this eternal longing by reaching outside ourselves, thinking that the answer has to be out there somewhere.

And yet the God-shaped hole can never be filled with any of those things. Only by accepting the love of God, can our God-shaped hole be filled. Only by giving ourselves over to the reality of our dependence on God, will we truly find the peace which passes human understanding.

In his temptation in the wilderness, Jesus was tempted to fill the God-shaped hole in his heart with other things. Jesus knew he could not. Instead he accepted his complete humanity, and gave himself unreservedly to God.

When we come to this table this morning to receive the body and blood of our Lord, we are allowing ourselves to experience our complete humanity, realizing that only God can fill that deep longing we have for connection and peace. In this fellowship, in this communion, we are blessed with the vision of our unity with all others. And when we see that we are all the same, the hole will finally be filled. Amen.