



“The Test”
Matthew 4:1-11
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
March 13, 2011

A colleague was serving a small congregation whose Evangelism Committee sent members into the community to invite people to their church. One Sunday afternoon members were paired, given a city map and assigned certain streets. One elderly couple took their street map, turned left instead of right, and ended up in the wrong neighborhood.

When they returned to church, they reported that they had discovered a real prospect, Verleen, who not only showed up the following Sunday, but came to the Tuesday woman's Bible study that the pastor led.

The topic at the Bible study was temptation, and the pastor began by asking, “Have any of you been faced with temptation but, with the help of Christ, resisted?”

The responses were pretty bland. One woman confessed that she had been tempted to keep a loaf of bread the checkout clerk at the grocery had failed to charge her for.

Then Verleen spoke up. She said, “A couple of years ago, I was into cocaine real big. . . You know how that stuff makes you crazy. Well, anyway, me and my boyfriend knocked over a gas station and got \$200. . . Then, he says to me, ‘Let's rob the Seven-Eleven, too.’ And something says to me, ‘No, I held up the gas station, but I'm not going to do a convenience store. He beat me . . . but I still said no. It felt great to say no. . . Made me feel like somebody.”

The other women sat in stunned silence, their eyes the size of saucers. After the pastor recovered, he mumbled something like, “Well, that is certainly resisting temptation.”

In the parking lot later, as he was helping one of the longtime group members to her car, the woman said, “I can't wait to get home and get on the phone. Your Bible studies used to be dull. I think we could get a crowd for this!”¹

Today's passage is the turn-to text on the topic of temptation. Yet, it is not a passage in which Jesus warns his followers of the enticements that can lure us away from God, but rather the vigorous test Jesus faced immediately prior to beginning his ministry.

Jesus was famished after forty days of fasting. The diabolical tempter seized this moment when Jesus was at his weakest to put him to the test. He urged Jesus to command stones to become loaves of bread. Surely God would want Jesus to have physical sustenance and to enjoy the taste of bread after his impressive discipline of fasting. There are plenty of stones in the wilderness, what's the harm in turning a few of them into bread?

No harm really, it's just that the first temptation is not really about bread. Jesus is not simply being encouraged to satisfy his hunger. The temptation is aimed at something more profound. On the surface, it is about hunger, but what it is really about is this: Who will Jesus trust to satisfy his needs? Will he fall for the tempter's suggestion that he can fulfill his own needs or will he recognize God as the giver of all good gifts? Will he rely on himself or will he trust God?

Jesus thwarts the first attempt to entrap him by quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy. We read in its eighth chapter that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years because God "was testing them to know what was in their hearts." (Deut. 8:2).

Today's story echoes that event. After fasting forty days, Jesus is tested to expose what is in his heart. Will he be his own man and march through life singing, "I did it MY way!" Or, will he trust God enough to go wherever God sends him? Bread will keep him alive, but Jesus knows God will make life rich. Jesus declines the first offer dangled before him.

Unsuccessful in his first attempt, diabolos has a seductive suggestion for his second test. He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and says, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." The tempter subtly questions Jesus' identity. He suggests that Jesus may not be God's Son; but here's an opportunity to prove it. And the way the tempter suggests he authenticate his identity is not by doing something morally questionable. He does not challenge Jesus to prove himself by having lightning strike all the sinners in the Holy City. The adversary does not hold out ugly options, he appeals to Jesus' holy desires. He wants Jesus to demonstrate God's power.

If Jesus leaps from the peak of the temple, and God provides him with a safe landing, then imagine how many followers Jesus will garner. Throngs of people will devote themselves to him. The deceiver is saying, "I'm giving you a marvelous opportunity here, Jesus. You don't want to pass this up." And to sweeten his suggestion, the tempter quotes the 91st Psalm. "It is written, '(God) will command his angels concerning you... On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" It's right there in the Bible.

I wonder how long Jesus actually pondered this temptation. If it all worked out as the tempter suggested, it would launch his ministry with panache. Keep in mind, at this point, Jesus has exactly zero followers and no name recognition. A blockbuster beginning would thrust him into a prominent role immediately. However, to do that, the one being tested must put God to the test. Jesus refuses and counters the tempter's Scripture quote with a verse of his own. Quoting Deuteronomy once again, he says, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

The forty days in the wilderness have taught Jesus that it is very tempting to use God for our own purposes. It is enticing for us to test God to see if God will do what we think is best. Jesus knows that rather than testing God, we need to trust God. When we test God, we act out of arrogance, which only reveals our ignorance. When we trust God, we act out of humility, which reveals our wisdom. How ridiculous to even entertain the thought that we know better than God.

Well, the wily old tempter is not easily discouraged. After Jesus has withstood the first two tests, the deceiver reckons he can still cause Jesus to stumble. He whisks Jesus to a high mountain, shows him the kingdoms of the world and says, "All these I will give you if you worship me.

How tantalizing! Would not anyone who believes his calling is to bring goodness to the world, want the power to institute justice for all, and to spread peace across the land? Surely if Jesus had the opportunity to rule the world, he should do it. He could usher in the divine realm

in which “the wolf will live with the lamb” and “where mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

If Jesus is offered a position where he can abolish strife, oppression, violence and suffering, he should grab the reins of power and make it happen immediately. So why does Jesus refuse the offer? He knows the deceiver cannot deliver. Authority and dominion reside with God.

Admittedly, God’s plan is much messier and far more unpredictable because it includes human beings. We have the power to work in partnership with God to spread mercy, justice and peace. But we also possess the power to resist God’s way and to pursue selfish ends.

Following this duel in the desert, in which the devil tested Jesus not with obvious idols, but rather glittering possibilities, Jesus calls his first disciples. He beckons, but does not coerce. And when the call is issued, each person must decide. Will I follow him or not? Will I follow the way of God that involves service to others or will I focus only on myself? Will I sacrifice for others or will I make the accumulation of wealth my top priority? Will I strive for justice for all people or will I simply enjoy the benefits of the status quo?

God’s Spirit sent Jesus into the wilderness immediately following his baptism in order to reveal his true character, because his character would shape the essence of his ministry. The tempter arrived on the scene hoping to warp his character. He was not attempting to turn Jesus into a monster; people would reject that in a flash. No, the deceiver tried to distort his character so mildly that most would not even notice, but enough to lead people astray.

Jesus saw through the chicanery and sent the prince of darkness packing, but the adversary did not surrender. After failing to distort the character of Jesus, he turned his attention elsewhere. He began to focus on easier targets. And he tries his trickery on us every day.

Brian McConnell grew up as a PK. For the uninformed, that stands for Preacher’s Kid. It’s not easy being a PK and no one would choose it. If you grow up a PK, members of the congregation keep a closer eye on you than they do the other youth. They have loftier expectations of you than your contemporaries.

Brian’s father was a Presbyterian minister and he recognized the added pressure Brian was under simply by virtue of being the son of a pastor. He tried to keep that in mind and not add to the pressure. But, whenever Brian headed out the door, whether it was to go to a party or off to college or a mission trip or to his first real job, his father would give him a hug and say, “Remember who you are.”

Brian knew what his father meant by those four words. He did not mean, “Remember, you are a McConnell.” He did not mean, “Remember, you are a man.” He meant, “You are a follower of Christ and that defines the essence of your character. You will have many other things that define you: lawyer, musician, husband, athlete, but these are not all equally important. Being a follower of Christ is the essence of who you are. It defines the kind of lawyer, husband and friend you become.”

When Brian was in his mid-thirties, he called his dad one day, and his father could hear the trembling in his son’s voice.

“Dad, I’m in trouble. I’m in big trouble. I got involved in a business deal that was not entirely ethical. The County Attorney is going to press charges. I could be disbarred. I could go to prison.”

His father said, “Son, what happened?”

And his son replied, “I forgot who I was.”

The tempter is constantly looking for new opportunities to test you. Remember who you are.

NOTES

1. John M. Buchanan, "Expansive," August 26, 2007 telling of an incident that happened to William Willimon.