

“Tempted”  
 March 5, 2017  
 First Sunday in Lent  
 Matthew 4:1-11

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

*He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.*

*The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."*

*But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,  
 saying 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.'"*

*Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."*

*Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"*

*Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

### Introduction

Our journey into Lent has begun. We are in the forty days of Lent. It begins on Ash Wednesday and goes to Holy Saturday (the day before Easter); not counting the Sundays, as they each represent a “mini-Easter,” we come to forty days. And early on, here on this first Sunday in Lent, we must go to the wilderness. Sometimes, it’s where the Spirit takes us. In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus himself is Spirit-led out to the wilderness to be tempted. He will be tempted by the same snake who slithered into the Garden of Eden. It worked with Adam and Eve; why not Jesus, too? Beware of the snake. The snake comes to trouble your soul, and then strikes when the moment is right with the intent to kill.

Will Jesus get bit? Will Jesus give in to the temptations of food, fame and power? Will he fail the test? After Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River, Matthew writes:

### Hungry? Perform a Miracle

*Jesus is led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasts forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he is famished.*

Forty day and forty nights; a familiar time span reminding us not only of the duration of Lent, but of the ancient stories of Noah and the great flood, and Moses on Mount Sinai when the Ten Commandments were handed down from God.

Jesus endures the wilderness for forty day and forty nights and his stomach is wrought with hunger, his body aching for food. There's hunger, and then there's hunger. Hungry, Jesus? Perform a miracle.

That enticing snake comes up to him and says, *"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."*

"Bread! Free bread! Come and get your bread!" You would hear this in the streets as Roman occupiers gave out bread to the people of Israel as a way to keep them happy. It's the appeal to the gut! This is how you get people in line. The devil is playing hunger games with Jesus with this temptation of food in a starvation situation. But Jesus has mastered his appetites, and,

*He answers, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

This is a direct reference to Deuteronomy chapter 8. Jesus grew up listening to readings of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Pentateuch. He quotes it fittingly, and he refuses to do the miracle.

But we do expect Jesus to work miracles all the time. Why wouldn't he? He is Jesus. But he doesn't give in.

### Be a Celebrity

Well, what about something spectacular? What about something that will impress everyone? What about something, Jesus, that could make you a celebrity superstar?

*The devil takes Jesus to the holy city and places him on the pinnacle of the temple, and says 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.'"*

Now there's a trick that would turn heads. That's the kind of thing that could make you famous.

When the devil says, "It is written, 'He will command angels concerning you,'" he is quoting Psalm 91. It seems he knows Scripture. He just doesn't know it as well as Jesus who quotes Deuteronomy once more as a rebuttal:

*"Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"* No stunt will be performed this day.

What a shame. Jesus could be such a great celebrity. Ah, but don't we want Jesus to be a celebrity? Don't we want our religion championed by a famous hero who can jump off a building and get saved by angels before hitting the ground? That would be impressive.

And yet, it's not happening.

### Grab Power

But then, there is one more temptation to ensnare Jesus. This one should work—it gets everyone else. Because nothing tempts quite like the prospect and promise of power. There's just a small price:

*The devil takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world; and says to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."*

This would make for a very powerful Jesus; and we all want a powerful Jesus, do we not? How different are we from even some of his early followers who believed he was coming in power to militarily defeat, at last, all the enemies of the people of God?

Will Jesus grab the power? All he needs to do is worship that snake, and the world will be his.

*Jesus says to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"* Once again, Jesus quoting straight out of Deuteronomy.

Jesus resists this temptation to power, too bad the body of Christ, the Church, at times in history, does not. Geo-political power is too good to pass up. But it's a trap. Jesus' power is an inverted power that operates from surrender and seeming weakness—the kind of power not understood by most of the world. It's a power that is manifested in the vulnerable and humiliating place of a cross.

### Deliverance

We acknowledge that from the beginning humanity has fallen to the temptations of evil. But now, in Jesus the Christ, the time has come to *renounce* the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and to turn from our sin. This sounds familiar because it is part of the liturgy we recite when the baptismal vows are spoken.

Evil is slippery and sly, and always angling to sink its teeth into us. It is no wonder that in the Lord's prayer Jesus teaches us to pray, "*Deliver us from evil.*" Better that we are not even tested. Jesus, of course, is tested—rigorously; and indeed, as mentioned at the beginning of the passage, he was even led into the wilderness for this test by the Spirit of God.

But this story about temptation shows us the character and essence of Jesus. He must not fail. Jesus will not be Jesus if he turns those stones into bread. Jesus will not be Jesus if he jumps off the top of that temple just to show angels saving him. Jesus will not be Jesus if he bows down to evil to grab power over the nations. To fail in any one of these will compromise his ministry. If Jesus goes down the same way as Adam and Eve, humanity remains lost. We watch and hold our breath, because if Jesus slips, the entire mission is lost, the cross becomes meaningless, and the Table of the Lord never gets set.

But you know how the story ends. Jesus, of course, passes the test, and God delivers him.

*The devil leaves him, Matthew writes, and suddenly angels come and wait on him.*

In God's own time, in God's own way those angels *do* come and bear Jesus up. And, in the end, the reluctant celebrity goes on to be the single most known person in

history. And the one who will have nothing to do with earthly power, ultimately gains power over death itself. And the very good news is the one who was tempted to turn stones into bread does not fail the test, thank God, but renounces evil once and for all, and himself becomes the bread of life, which heals the soul and satisfies humanity's deepest hunger. Amen.