



Christ United Methodist Church

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Date: March 1, 2020

Sermon: Claimed by God's Love

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

Speaker: Pastor Cheryl Arnold

On the first Sunday of Lent, the gospel text assigned by the lectionary—that 3-year cycle of scripture readings—is always that of Jesus' Temptations. The only thing that changes is whether we read it from Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

In each of these gospels, this story follows Jesus' baptism by John. Jesus rises up from the waters, the Holy Spirit lands on him, and then God speaks from the heavens, telling whoever can hear that Jesus is God's beloved son and that God is happy, or well-pleased, with him.

And then, depending on which gospel and which translation, that same Spirit leads, sends, pushes, drives, or forces a soaking-wet Jesus into the wilderness, where he'll be tempted by the devil.

Yes, did you catch that? *The Spirit* brings Jesus into the wilderness. And if that doesn't give you something to chew on this Lent, I don't know will.

So...how do the gospel accounts of today's story compare? Well, some differences are obvious. Mark doesn't tell us how Jesus was tempted, Matthew and Luke list the temptations in different orders, and Luke's last line omits the angels and promises that the devil will be back.

But more subtle differences have to do with timing and motive.

A close reading of these accounts reveals that only Matthew has Jesus' temptation start *after* his 40 days in the wilderness—and only Matthew says that Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness in order "*to be tempted by the devil.*" The Message Bible is even clearer, with Matthew 4:1 saying: "Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it."

Perhaps Matthew wrote his account this way because he was writing for Jewish-Christians, people whose tradition *expected* their faith to be tested.

Just look back to Genesis, which was our first reading this morning. In Genesis 2:15-17, God puts the man in the garden of Eden so that he'll take care of it. God tells him that he can eat from the garden's trees, but not from the tree of "the knowledge of good and evil"—because on the day he eats from it, he will die. Where's the woman, you ask? Nowhere. Unlike the story in Genesis 1, where man and woman are created at the same time, in Genesis 2 she isn't created for another 5 verses.

By the next chapter, the serpent is conversing with the woman. Genesis 3:6 tells us that the man is with her, but he apparently just stands there with his mouth open, unable to speak. The serpent

tempts the humans by telling them that contrary to what God said, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil won't kill them—it will make them like God, knowing good and evil.

So, desiring wisdom—which seems like a good thing—the woman eats the fruit, and so does the man. And the serpent was right. Adam and Eve don't drop dead—instead, they immediately recognize their nakedness, their vulnerability.

In their quest to become like God, they realize that they're not God.

And who can forget the heart-wrenching story in Genesis 22, where God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac? It begins like this: "After these events, God tested Abraham." Thankfully the story ends without a murder—Abraham passed the test—but don't you wonder what Abraham and Isaac talked about on the way, or what Abraham said to his wife, Sarah, when he left that morning?

I don't know about you, but the idea of being tested by God makes me a little nervous. Maybe it's because I know that 9 times out of 10, I'm going to fail. But after reflecting on the scripture this week with various people, I've come to understand and agree that tests aren't always bad—sometimes they help me grow.

But please, be careful trying to convey that to people in crisis. I've seen good people do a whole lot of harm when they try to justify tragedy in the world by saying things like "God is testing you—all you need is more faith." And if you're tempted to use today's gospel text to back you up, remember that Matthew, Mark and Luke all agree that Satan is the tester, not God.

Clearly, the Jews knew and accepted that they'd be tested—and they developed a tradition of preparing for those tests physically and spiritually through fasting, prayer, abstinence, and other disciplines.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus has 40 days to prepare for whatever Satan is going to throw at him—when the devil finally shows up, Jesus knows it's a test. We can be sure that he's fasted, he's prayed, and he's immersed himself in the faith stories that he knew by heart.

How interesting that when Jesus rebukes the devil by quoting his Hebrew Bible, each time he uses scripture from Deuteronomy, recalling Moses' words about the Israelites' 40 years in the wilderness—a time that Moses referred to as a test.

Scholar and blogger Debie Thomas says, "The devil doesn't come to make Jesus do something 'bad.' He comes to make Jesus do what seems entirely sensible and good—but for all the wrong reasons."

Satan tempts Jesus to exploit God's power, to use it to become satisfied, safe, and *more* powerful. Jesus refuses.

Satan says, "If you are God's son, turn these stones into bread." But Jesus won't feed himself—only the hungry crowds.

Satan says, "If you are God's son, let the angels lift you up." And Jesus will be lifted up—but it will be on a cross.

Satan says, "Bow down and worship me and I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world." Jesus will get all the kingdoms—but not until after he is crucified and resurrected.

If we think we can't relate to the story of Jesus and the devil's temptations, I say think again. We too can be tempted to do what seems entirely sensible and good—but for the wrong reasons.

We all have our own wildernesses—maybe it's the loss of control experienced through addiction, the trust that's broken by a toxic relationship, the despair brought on by the loss or betrayal of a loved one. How often do we try to lead ourselves out of that wilderness—calling on God only when all else fails?

In addition to fasting, prayer, and recalling the stories of his faith, I believe something else was key in helping Jesus pass the devil's test. And that was having 40 days—a long time—to re-live his memory of rising up from the waters, being filled with the Holy Spirit, and hearing God declare: "You are my beloved son; you make me happy."

After 40 days in the desert, when Satan asked Jesus, "If you are God's son..." Jesus never doubted it—he already knew who he was. And I think he spent the rest of his life discerning what that meant, and how he would live that out.

So what about us? Do we know we've been named and claimed by our Creator—that all people have been named and claimed by God? Do we live like it?

During this season of Lent, let's pay attention. Let's counter the tests and temptations we face by reminding ourselves that God loves us and that we make God happy—not because of what we do, but because of who we are—God's own children.

And eventually, maybe somewhere between 40 days and 40 years, we'll come to believe it.

Loving God, we thank you for this day and for the chance to worship and grow together. We thank you for the gift of your son Jesus, who showed us how to live and then gave his life for us. We thank you for this holy mystery which helps us draw closer to you and to one another, where by eating the bread and drinking the cup, Jesus lives in us and we live in Jesus. We ask for your forgiveness, your guidance, your provision, and your protection as we journey through our own wildernesses. Assure us that you have not left us alone, but that you are right there beside us in everything we do and experience. Amen.