

What does the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness teach us?

Matthew 4:2 He (Jesus) fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

That is a very human response. Jesus had a body like ours that relied on food to fuel it. Jesus, here, was starving or ravenous.

There are two prominent matters in the tempter's words. One, he begins with a challenge, "If you are the Son of God. . ." "So, Jesus, supposedly the Holy Spirit of God came to you at your baptism by John. A voice from heaven was heard to say," <sup>(Matt. 3:17b)</sup> "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." So prove it to yourself and to me by turning these very stones into bread to sate your ravenous hunger.'

The temptation here is to both prove that he, Jesus, is the Son of God and to feed his starving body. Both are good things, right? Ah, but there is a catch! Jesus came to save the world, not to be tricked by the devil for some false and shallow victory short of his mission from God. As well, this relationship with God the Father, announced just verses early at his baptism, is now confirmed through Jesus' unswerving trust in God.

So as a result of the first temptation in Matthew's account, we learn that: 1) Jesus is a real human being by the state of his physical hunger; 2) He is not about to demonstrate he is the Son of God short of God's purpose for his incarnation, his being born into this world; 3) Jesus firmly trusts in God the Father. Jesus responded with Deuteronomy 8:3, recalling the people of Israel in the wilderness. <sup>Deut. 8:3</sup> (God) humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, . . ., in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

Of course, the tempter did not relent based on this initial foray. 'So, this Jesus is convinced he is going to trust God above all things, is he. I,' says the tempter, 'will see about that.' So high from the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem, the tempter throws out an ultimate test of Jesus' relationship to his Father. 'Oh, so you trust God as your father do you? If you ARE the Son of God, then throw yourself down from this high place. Surely God, all powerful God, will protect you!' The tempter even uses scripture, quoting Psalm 91. <sup>11</sup> For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. <sup>12</sup> On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

I suppose if Jesus were tired of this banter from the tempter, you and I in his place might think, "Well, if I just go ahead and do this, demonstrate this to the devil, he will leave me alone." We would consider perhaps this is a quick way out. But Jesus persists in trusting God beyond the petty, virtually childish, game of the tempter. Jesus knew his life was not about play and that he was to be the agent of God's saving the world, not God having to save Jesus from the perils of such a foolish decision. And so, once again, Jesus drew on scripture. <sup>Deut. 6:16</sup> Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested

him at Massah. And what is Massah, it means 'test.' The People of Israel in the wilderness had cried out that Moses had brought them into the wilderness to die of thirst. So God provided water from a rock. <sup>Exodus 17:7</sup> He (Moses) called the place Massah <sup>(test)</sup> and Meribah, <sup>(quarrel)</sup> because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Well, it is not over until it is over. So there is one more temptation on the heels of this. In the third -- more an out-and-out bribe attempt than temptation -- Jesus is promised all the power and glory the earth can offer if he will give his allegiance and devotion to the Tempter. What was the tempter thinking? Well, clearly, Jesus to this point has demonstrated his allegiance to his Father. So now, let us see if Jesus will succumb to a quick victory, gain the whole world without suffering and without dying. Jesus was quick to say, Matthew 4:10b "Away with you, Satan!! For it is written, <sup>Deut. 6:13</sup> 'The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.' At that, the devil left Jesus.

Jesus, in these temptations, responds to Satan with scripture references to the Hebrew's forty years wandering in the wilderness. That forty year journey in the wilderness is a story of the failing to trust God and God rescuing them, again and again and again. Here Jesus is a new and faithful promise of life lived for God and in obedience to God. Jesus does so for the sake of the Hebrews of old and for our sake.

"If you are the Son of God," Satan had begun. In other words, "How do you know you are God's Son?" Hence the core of the temptation: "Wouldn't it be better to know for certain? Turn stone to bread, jump from the Temple, worship me...and you will never know doubt again. You will know. You will be sufficient on your own." The temptation is the same, but Jesus responds by refusing to establish his own worth and identity on his own terms but instead remains dependent on God. Jesus knows who he is, that is, by remembering whose he is. In each case, Jesus rejects the temptation and lodges his identity, future, and fortunes on God's character and trustworthiness.<sup>1</sup>

It is this Jesus who leads us into these 40 days of lent. He leads us toward Jerusalem and his entry there on Palm Sunday; to the Last Supper, his praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, his betrayal, trial and crucifixion and to the wonder of Easter morning. Jesus leads us in his faithfulness to the very feet of God and God's promise to you and to people of every time and place.

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1 David Lose, [www.worhingpreacher.org](http://www.worhingpreacher.org) for March 13, 2011, Gospel commentary

Matthew 4:1-11

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." <sup>4</sup> But he answered, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" <sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> 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.'" <sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" <sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup> and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" <sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.