

Lent 1 Matthew 4:1-11

We have a lot of jokes about temptation... "I can resist anything but temptation," is a common phrase in all circles...religious and non. I think we do that because we're nervous. We know it's not just funny, but true, and maybe by making light of giving in to temptation, it won't matter quite so much.

The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is a rich one, and it is no accident that it is the first thing he encounters in ministry. Jesus is baptized, and no sooner is he out of the water than the Spirit of God leads him out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. It is an initiation rite of sorts and it takes him up a mountain. With each of the three temptations, Jesus moves physically higher and higher as the tests get harder and harder. Finally, he beats them all and the angels of God meet him on top of the mountain to replenish his strength.

At the bottom of the mountain is the first type of temptation. For Jesus it became the opportunity to turn stones into bread. I think the larger type of temptation is our general tendency to try to get nourishment from the wrong places. In that category are most of the things that society generally terms "temptation," the addictions of our lives that we turn to, but which never satisfy our real hunger...drugs, sex, shopping, alcohol, tobacco. They are all stones that we are trying to turn into bread that will feed us. But of course they don't. Turn the stones into bread if you will...make them palatable through justification and excuses...they will not nourish either your body or your soul, and they may be your ruin.

We beat this temptation by recognizing the truth of Jesus' words when he said, "I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never go hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty." The Psalms tell us over and over again that God is the one who provides food in due season for every living thing. If you are trying to find satisfaction elsewhere, you will never even start to climb the mountain. You are beating the bushes all around the base of the mountain, looking for the wrong things. Look up. The light shining down will show you the one place at the base of the mountain where there is a path. Go there. Even if it is hard. Don't spend your money and your labour for that which is not bread. Feed on the Bread of Life.

From the plain, the devil takes Jesus to the city, up to the rooftop of the temple, suggesting that he prove his importance to God by jumping off and getting the angels to catch him. This is a higher level temptation, and it takes advantage of what we learned at the first level. By this point we know what feeds us and what doesn't. We took a step out in faith to see if God would provide nourishment and satisfaction if we left the stones behind. God did provide, and that was exciting. We began to climb eagerly, wanting to get to the top. The path is plain before us, but sometimes it looks too hard and we think...I know now that I

have to go up the mountain, but there are other ways up. That path over there looks a bit easier. God will provide for me.

The second temptation is the temptation to be irresponsible and let God pick up the pieces from our less than sensible decisions. I can jump off the temple roof and God will catch me. At this level we are tempted to become the spoiled children of God, expecting that God will pick up all our messes, even if we spend the whole day watching TV. We all have to examine our lives and ask are we spoiled children of God? If we ever want to get to the top of the mountain, we have to stop expecting God to do the climbing for us. God gives us strength and nourishment and all we need for the journey, but the journey itself is ours to choose and ours to make.

And then comes the summit, and the hardest test of all. Who will you worship? In one sense it is the same question that we faced at the bottom of the mountain...will we look to God or to other things? But here at the top, the temptation is more subtle. At the bottom we faced off with the things that everybody knows will ruin you. At the top, our choices are all good options. The question at the top is what is your priority? Out of all the good things in the world, what gets top billing? We look around. One choice is family. We could put family first, nothing comes before them. We could put financial gain in front...not in a destructive way like at the bottom of the mountain, but if I just dedicated more time to my work and brought in more income, just think of the good I could do in the world. I could start a foundation to help the poor, I could give so much more to the church.

The church itself could sit at the top, vying for top position. I could make my work for the church and the survival of my church priority #1. There are other less important things I could be doing, I could drop those and volunteer more time at church. That is really where my allegiance belongs. The church and God are not necessarily the same thing. Or it might be some other worthy cause that would like to be the most important thing in our lives. It might be some other person.

What sets off the temptations at the top of the mountain, is that they are all good things. None of them are things that should be ignored...all need attention and some level of priority. This is the final test, the final sorting out of whether we are truly committed to living out the words of Deuteronomy 6, which the Jews call the Shema...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. All. Jesus said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Then all these other things will be given to you as well."

When Jesus passed that test, the devil left him, and the angels came and ministered to him.

Now there's incentive. To make God is our first priority. If we make something or someone else number one, then look to them for support. It might last for awhile, but other things will let us down. There will come a time when we need to be ministered to, and they are not there. They can't be...and it's unrealistic to expect them to be. They are not God. Only God, with can be there to minister to us each and every time we need it. But if we prefer to look elsewhere, God will abide by our decision, and hold off until we get our priorities straight. God comes by invitation and by our choice, not by force.

The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is the story of our spiritual growth. It is what Jesus must prove before He is sent out into ministry, and so it is with us. If we want to be disciples, our first task is to climb the mountain of temptation. To learn first that God alone can nourish us; to learn second that we have to do our part in the climbing; and to learn lastly that, even though many wonderful things clamber for our attention, we need to make God absolutely and unquestionably first in our lives. All that is left is to ask ourselves Where are we on the mountain? Do we dare climb higher?