

Home By Another Way: Tempted

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 4:1-11
on January 15, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

I've told you before the story from Indian priest Anthony de Mello that went something like this:

"A rich industrialist from the North was horrified to find a Southern fisherman lying leisurely beside his boat. 'Why aren't you fishing?' asked the industrialist.

'Because I have caught enough fish for the day,' said the fisherman.

'Why don't you catch some more?'

'What would I do with them?'

'You could earn more money,' said the industrialist. 'With that, you could fix a motor to your boat, go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough money to buy nylon nets. These would bring you more fish and more money. Soon you would have enough money to own two boats... maybe even a fleet of boats to pass down to your sons. Then you would be a rich man like me.'

'What would I do then?'

'Then you could really enjoy life.'

'What do you think I am doing right now?' said the fisherman."¹

Temptation comes in all forms, doesn't it? Or as Fred Craddock said, "we aren't tempted to do what we cannot do, but what is within our power."²

¹ Story from Anthony de Mello retold in *Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, p293

² Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p56.

II.

In these January weeks, we're journeying with Jesus in the early moments of his ministry in the world with Matthew, the gospel writer, as our guide. Last Sunday, we entered the waters of baptism with Jesus, being immersed with him within the belovedness of God before ever earning a drop of that grace. Appropriate, I think, that baptism was Jesus' first public act, because from the waters he moves to the wilderness. And as I've sat with this text this week, I am more convinced than ever that Jesus' baptism and season in the wilderness are like two sides of the same coin, both a piece of each other.

This text of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is one we most often hear and contextualize each year on the first Sunday of Lent, those forty days of penitence and reflection that precede Easter. We often cede that seasonal invitation to deepen into a wilderness of our spirit, to let the wind whistle through the spare limbs of our lives, to be humbled by the raw landscape around us. Considering Jesus' temptation within the context of our own – particularly cocooned within the spiritual disciplines of Lent – makes for a sober start to our path to cross and tomb.

Yet I wonder what this passage might teach us outside of its familiar contours of Lent, when New Year's resolutions are a fortnight into practice (and perhaps already discarded), when the new year offers us the turning of a page to look carefully at the things in our life that have grabbed hold of our attention, our energies, our money, our loyalty, luring us away from the immersive truth of our inherent belovedness.

III.

Let's start with a word about the characters in the story other than Jesus himself. First: the Spirit. Fresh from an appearance at the waters of Jesus' baptism, it is the Spirit who leads Jesus into the wilderness for what becomes of his temptation, she who guides him there. It's as if the Spirit, so wholly connected to God as the breath of God, knew that in order to trust his belovedness, Jesus had to take a few steps away from it.

Then: the tempter himself, the one Matthew calls "the devil." Now: whatever your perspective might be on this character – personified throughout our holy scriptures as a mosaic of a fallen angel from the beginning, seen as serpent in Genesis and dragon in Revelation, named Lucifer and Leviathan and Satan – no matter if you experience him as a flesh-and-blood fiend or a force of evil in the world, every time we hear one of these references, it opens our understanding to think of the devil as all that stands in adverse relationship to God, or as one scholar says, "all those who obstruct and resist what God intends for human life."³

Like that story of the fisherman, each of the temptations that Jesus experienced by the tempter was a good thing distorted. Bread is good! Jesus will later feed the thousands with it, then hold it up to his disciples and claim it as his body given for them. Bread nourishes and meets a bodily need, and Jesus was starving, Matthew tells us! What's the big deal about turning some stones into rolls? What's it to him to just use his power to meet his needs?

Without success, the tempter tries again, this time to have Jesus call upon his unique relationship with God for his own safety. And God is good, right? Jesus will later act on behalf of God to bring healing and cure disease,

³ Thomas Long, *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*, p37.

to teach and to guide, to reorder unjust systems and turn eyes and hearts towards God's coming dream for the world. What's the big deal about throwing himself off the cliff and letting the angels keep him safe? What harm could it bring to put that on display a bit?

For a third and final time, Jesus hears an invitation, to receive all that is already his if only he'd worship the one whose temptations he hears. Power is good, particularly in Jesus' hands! And knowing how Jesus' eventual death and resurrection will lift him above any kingdom of this world, what's the big deal about a quick bow? What harm would occur if he took an abbreviated trip to that end, hopping over the suffering and getting right on to the victory?

Bread, safety, power; what satiates, what confirms, what quickens. In each of these offerings, the tempter attempts for Jesus to shortcut his way through the wilderness: to make small the vast ministry of his calling, to limit his trust of God instead of leaning fully into his faith, to skip the messy middle of life and get right onto the win.

We who read this text can often wonder: *are these Jesus-specific temptations? Are they uniquely tailored to the Son of God, or are these also ones that I might succumb to as well?* But let's remember — long before these temptations faced Jesus, they faced the people of Israel: bread, safety, and power: all three, in that order, fresh from their deliverance out of Egypt in the wilderness. These are ancient attractions, ones that have been set before the people of God in the world, a story retelling itself with each new generation to enter it. But where Israel was tested and stumbled, Jesus was tested and remained faithful to God, confirming the identity conferred upon him in the waters of baptism.

And what of us? What might these unholy invitations look like in the shape of a 2023 life? These ancient temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness were for bread, power, and safety, ones so deeply woven into our psyche, but they could just have easily been for water, success, and legacy... or intimacy, wealth, and being right... or all manner of other temptations as we understand them. In the same way, the temptations you and I face may look at first glance like opportunities or potential achievements ahead, like the very possibility you've been waiting for, or the miracle drug that will cure what ails. Indeed at first glance, temptations look reasonable and fair. That's why they're tempting! Why not meet my immediate needs? Why not test the reach of my authority? Why not claim what I know will be mine?

But as we all know – temptations distort. They ask you to winnow what is wide, to test what is already sure, to clip what, by its very essence, needs to take time. What may begin as a desire for justice may actually be the thing that keeps you perpetually angry; what started with kind companionship of a friend in need becomes a never-satisfied need to be needed; what once was a love for all sorts of experiences in this life becomes a gluttonous, distracted rout through people and places and things, never ever satisfied; what originated as a needed corrective toward self-care from the implicit encouragement we might feel as Christians in the South of “helping everyone else at your own expense” becomes a zealous hoarding of our time and energy lest we be inconvenienced; what arose as drive and ambition becomes an unstoppable, unencumbered quest for success.

For indeed, **these are less temptations to do what we really want to do, and more temptations to be someone other than who God would have us to be.**

IV.

Just this week I had a conversation with one of you, and you said to me, “you know, I just never feel like I am enough. I never feel like I’m enough! I wake up every morning, and I already feel like my day begins with a deficit. There are things I didn’t get done yesterday. I overslept. The dirty dishes are still in the sink. I didn’t make it to the gym. I get to work, and there’s a pile of emails and tasks already waiting for me. My kids got mad at each other that morning. The day unfolds, and it’s all a mess: I’m running behind, my spouse is unhappy with me, my kids are wild, and I get to the end of the day wondering, “when is it going to **stop**, this feeling of never being enough? *When is it going to stop?*”

And yet, almost as if this is the other half of the story we heard last week, in our baptism, God says, “this is my child, my beloved, in whom I am well-pleased. These are my children, my beloveds, in whom I am well pleased. *You are enough!* There is nothing you can do to earn your way there. You already have it. It is already yours.”

Indeed those temptations that lead us to think we need to do what we really want to do instead of being who we already are? Those are the deepest traps of them all. And that place of feeling like we’re never enough? That, I think, is where temptation really begins.

No matter who we are, these are the temptations we face. Augustine, that great church leader and philosopher of the 4th century, wrote a series of theological writings called *Confessions*, considered widely to be among the most important books ever written. It was there in his *Confessions* we hear Augustine wrestling with his temptations and how God invited him towards repentance. Those moments of turning away from temptation and turning

toward God were half-hearted at best. Translated from the Latin, Augustine wrote: “Give me chastity and continence,” he said, “but not yet.”⁴

V.

In the words of a dear friend, “if Jesus went to the desert to find out just what it meant to be Jesus, perhaps this desert of reflection is where you can find even more of what it means to be you.” Perhaps for you, these fresh winter days can be spent with the Spirit and the tempter alike, listening carefully to what beckons and remembering what grounds you in God’s unconditional love and care for you. Perhaps for you, the same angels that ministered to Jesus can surround you and remind you of your identity as beloved. Perhaps for our church, these winter weeks can be for us a season when we discover the distinct shape of our obedience, discovering more fully who and whose we are. And perhaps when we find our way home by way of the wilderness, we’ll recognize who we’ve been all along – the ones God calls ‘beloved.’ Amen!

⁴ <https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-on-temptation/>