

Sermon: First Lent

Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

The usual way of interpreting the story just read from Matthew's Gospel is to make it something of a heroic tale. In keeping with his destiny, Jesus established his credentials right out of the gate, proving himself worthy and resolute in the face of great trials. And, as with many hero stories, a moral is then quick to follow: we should show similar resolve when, in our own lives, temptations arise and we feel ourselves inclined toward enticing but dubious decisions and actions. WWJD: what would Jesus do? He would just say no.

Read this way, Jesus' time in the wilderness was a long hardship, weeks of deprivation that would have naturally weakened his self-discipline. The devil saved the best for last, spinning delectable visions before him precisely when he would have had the least resistance to them. Imagining such hunger, the desires that erupt from suffering wholesale desolation, it is easy to see, in turn, and with admiration, the stalwart will by which Jesus rebuffed the seductions pushed before him. Thus, we, who have not been so deprived ourselves, drawing the clear moral, should be able to be as sturdy in our own resistance in our own time to the world's seductions.

To read the Gospel in this way, however, is to make less of it than we should. For by reading this way, we privilege ourselves with the assumption that we are coming to this text relatively out of context. All the pertinent temptations, we imagine, are those that simply lie ahead of us, in decisions that we have yet to make. We presume, thereby, that we are standing on neutral ground – that we aren't already mired in and compromised by the kind of life we have chosen and are now pursuing. Yet, in truth, we have already decided about the matters with which the devil tempted Jesus. We have chosen many times and in many ways on whose side to stand. We may say "no" to many relatively petty things, the small issues for which we commonly use the term "temptation." But our replies to the greater seductions the devil presented have long been and continue to be a series of resounding "yes's." "I'll take that one." The more authentic and challenging way to engage this story, then, is to read it backward, admitting from the beginning that our situation, and the wisdom we use to justify it, differs markedly from what Jesus himself chose. We stand on the other side of his responses.

The devil tempted Jesus with suggestions of bread. He had had none. We, however, have more food than we can eat, and we eat far more than we need. Hunger isn't our problem. Obesity is. We aren't anxious about scarcity. We're anxious about our waistlines. How many millions of books sold each year tell us, in wonderfully creative recipes, how to put weight on, and, just across the aisle, how many, then, instruct us how to painlessly – with the right formula – take it back off?

The devil tempted Jesus with visions of safety and security. We have the longest average life-span of any population in the world and in world history. We are generally free of epidemics, secured from our enemies, and able to fend off whatever risks arise. We

enjoy an unprecedented balance of law with freedom, of responsibility matched by opportunity. Our concerns are turning, from the fear of sudden death to the dread of an extended deterioration and a prolonged process of dying.

The devil tempted Jesus with the power to reign over the earth. We are citizens of the only recognized superpower in the world today. Our military spending alone exceeds the Gross National Product of entire countries. Our economic strength surpasses all others. We consume more of the world's resources than any other people. Few enjoy the luxuries that we consider absolutely basic.

We have all these things, in abundance. We're flush in the very goods that Jesus rejected. Yet here's the interesting part. For all our abundance, which has never been known before; it's still not quite enough. Our markets have become superstores; our meals super-sized. Our houses have become mansions; our cars have become SUV's. It's no longer practical to have borders on the work week or single income families; maximizing goods means maximizing efforts. Keeping up requires more diligence, getting what you want demands extra time, keeping what you have calls for constant vigilance. Nineteen angry men took down the towers of world trade in a single morning. Economic retraction causes panic of collapse within moments. In spite of all of our astounding wealth, we seem to be in a double bind. On one hand, our desires seem insatiable and, consequently, because of our need to so extend ourselves, we also feel insecure and exposed. We have the very things the devil offered. What we don't want to admit is that something of the devil seems to have come with them.

If we read Matthew's story backward, however, what opens to us is not Jesus the hero, who withstood the best shots the devil could take. We are given, instead, a vision of Jesus who did what Adam, in the original Garden of Eden, did not. As Paul has pointed out, Jesus is a kind of anti-Adam, repairing all that with Adam was fractured. Jesus chose to believe that God would, in every important sense, minister to his needs. He chose to believe that what is sufficient to life is a trust in God's grace and beneficence and that this, in itself, is plenty. He chose to believe that the wilderness in which he wandered, was garden enough. He did not need more. If you read the story backward, its illumination is not that Jesus did not succumb to the lavish temptations set before him. The true illumination comes in seeing that the temptations offered by the devil didn't tempt Jesus at all. He felt no need of what was offered him. We project this struggle on him, quite apart from the text. The passage doesn't contain the merest hint that Jesus had to fight back his own impulses in order to be obedient.

For him, rather, life itself sings of God, so life itself seemed enough. Time experienced is time given, so time itself seemed enough. Breath and pulse in each recurring movement mark the world with a punctuated reminder of blessing, so each was enough to provide undiminished joy. Even the wilderness, bereft of our own sense of comfort and ease, still reveals the beauty of being the creation of God. What was lacking was not an issue of nature but of heart and soul and eye. Reading backward, the story doesn't tell us to do what Jesus did and refuse alluring temptation. We are, rather, directed to see who Jesus *was* and how he understood himself before God. We are directed to see what human

being *means*, existing as a creature within the providence of God. And this is a far more significant matter and an issue of more comprehensive, more global importance.

I have never forgotten a moment, two years ago, when our mission team stood in the middle of an impoverished Batey village in the Dominican Republic. We had driven in by bus, flush with bags of food and clothes, with cameras, sun screen, bottled water, and a full day's agenda. When the people of the village gathered, a number of children in the village had no clothes. It soon became apparent that they also had no parents. There seemed to be no schedule for any of the adults. Time had very little movement. Many persons were disfigured from malnutrition. No one had plenty.

When we set down the provisions we had brought for them, members of each household stepped forward and graciously accepted them. As soon as the food was taken, it also began to be shared. There was no racing about, or persons scurrying to get more. There was no greed or voraciousness. Abundance seems to elicit these, more than scarcity. What we brought seemed to be gratefully accepted as a gift of plenty, without its being measured first, without the recipients having made any calculations of what they needed or what we, by rights, should or could have provided. Poverty is never noble, but sometimes it can show us how quietly ignoble we've become from all the varying dimensions of wealth we've claimed and still, with fervor, chase.

The passage read from Genesis this morning tells of the primal rift between God and us, the great temptation to which we first fell. Having enough, we wanted more. Paul then declared that this very fundamental break has been overcome by God's decision to bestow the gift of reconciliation that extends beyond all trespass. What Matthew shows us is how Jesus lived this grace, in such trust that temptations became hollow, vain words and empty promises, and all the violence stemming from our fears, even ignominious crucifixion, could not deny him God's abounding mercy and abiding life.

We are invited, then, to live ourselves within "this mind of Christ," manifesting the deep assurance that God's plenty is comprehensive, even beyond the time of our death too. Then we will not find ourselves torn amid the sundry cares and desires that so occupy us, that convince us that, still, we do not have enough, that cause us to suffer scarcity within the profusion of our abundance. This, especially given the stresses of our time, is the more powerful and challenging Gospel.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen