



“Between Knowing and Doing”

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Mt. 4:1:1-11 (NRSV)***

The Christian season of Lent began this past week. We marked our entry into it with the Ash Wednesday Service held in Pioneer Chapel.

This season lasts 40 days and commemorates Jesus’ 40 days of wandering and being tempted by Satan in the desert. The number 40 is a biblical euphemism for “a long, but limited, period of time.”¹ In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is presented as the new Moses, so his 40 days in the desert links him with the most prominent figure in Ancient Judaism, Moses, who spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness with the Hebrew people.

If you have a precocious child in your family who gets out the calendar and counts the days, you’ll want to explain that Holy Days and Sundays aren’t included in the 40-day count, from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday.

II

Each year, on the first Sunday in Lent, one of the three Gospel versions of Christ’s temptations appears in the lectionary and is read around the world in Christian churches. The three appear in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, respectively. This year’s version is from Matthew 4:1-11.

According to Matthew, the Spirit led Jesus into the desert where he was tempted by the devil three times. Jesus’ *first* temptation was to use the wrong means to achieve a good end. Jesus’ *second* temptation was to use his God-given power for demonic purposes. And his *third* temptation was to exchange loyalty to God for earthly gain. Let’s review the three:

Matthew writes, “The tempter came to Jesus and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But Jesus answered, ‘It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (4:4) **Here Jesus is tempted to achieve a good end—producing food for the hungry (including himself)—through the wrong means.**

¹ Forty was the number of days that it rained during the Great Flood (Gen. 7). Forty was the number of days Moses stayed on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24). Forty was also the number of years that David and other favored Kings ruled Ancient Israel (2 Sam. 5, 1 Kings 11; 2 Chron. 24.) C.f., *The Learning Bible: Contemporary English Version*, (New York: American Bible Society, 1995) p. 2310.

With the second temptation, the devil challenged Jesus to prove that he was the son of God by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple, demonstrating how the angels would rescue him. **Here Jesus was tempted to use his God-given power for demonic purposes.**

Jesus' third temptation was the temptation to sacrifice his loyalty to God for worldly gain. Matthew writes, "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' (4:8-9)

Jesus offers a biblical retort to each temptation that the devil presents. The dialogue closes with Jesus' declaration, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship...and serve only God.'" (4:10)

III

To discern the meaning of today's gospel reading, it's helpful to know a few things about the desert setting (some translations say "wilderness") for the story, about the nature of temptations, about the role of fasting in religious life, and about the significance of the temptation experience in Jesus' life relative to our own challenges.

Jesus' desert experience was not a unique experience for a spiritual leader like himself. In Deuteronomy 9, we read that Moses prayed and fasted in the wilderness, and in the gospels we read about John the Baptist, who spent most of his prophetic ministry in the desert. Those who have studied a little church history or come from Roman Catholic traditions may be familiar with contemplative religious orders like the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who spent many years in the desert in prayer and meditation, in fulfillment of their religious vocations.

Jesus' temptations have been the focus of many Christians' reflections during this season, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, where the practice of "giving something up for Lent" has been adopted as a way of gaining moral strength for resisting future and more compelling temptation in life, as Jesus did in the desert.

For the sports fans in the congregation, I liken Jesus' temptations and the season of Lent to a new rookie showing up at "spring training" for the Cactus League. Lessons learned in the Cactus League build character and prowess for the tougher seasons that lie ahead.

IV

In addition to knowing something more about the significance of the desert setting in religious life, it's helpful for our understanding and interpretation of today's gospel text to note the difference between perplexity and temptations, and to notice the relationship between Christ's temptations and our own.

First, let's note the difference between perplexity and temptation. *Perplexity* is the phenomenon that occurs when we don't know what's right or wrong in a given situation. *Temptation*, by contrast, is the phenomenon in which we know the difference between right and wrong, but feel drawn to do the wrong thing.

Sometimes temptation is masked as perplexity, especially when we do the wrong thing and have to face the consequences. E.g., "But officer, I didn't know that this was a 25 mile per hour speed zone." Or, "Gee, Mom, my buddy said that it was OK with his parents for us to throw a party while they were away for the weekend."

Both the speeding and the party examples reflect a time when a person was tempted to do the wrong thing, and they succumbed to that temptation, when in truth, the person "facing the music" knew right from wrong, from the get go.

Temptations by their very nature have a vortex that can potentially pull us off course. They can distract us from our normal course of action and from what we know to be right and true. Temptation is a natural part of human life. What tempts us may vary, but the phenomenon of temptation is universal. All of us are tempted. Even Jesus was tempted. Part of the power of today's gospel reading, and Jesus' ministry, is that he lived deeply the human struggle. His temptations were real and compelling for him.

It is in large part because Jesus squarely faced these temptations, and successfully resolved them, that his life is worthy of emulation. But how? How can we be more like Jesus? How can we avoid succumbing to temptations that would otherwise lead us down the slippery slope of successively worse decisions?

V

Today's gospel reading reveals at least three ways to stay strong in the face of temptation. One insight from Jesus' example is to latch onto a spiritual practice that is helpful for us—one that enables us to get and be more clear about who we are, about what's right and good, and about how to stay strong enough to make good choices and to keep making good choices in our lives.

For Jesus, fasting—at least in the face of temptation—seemed helpful. Fasting was a common practice that he learned in childhood as a Jew. Some common occasions for fasting included (and continue to include) preparing for or observing special holidays or seasons, as an expression of confession, and/or as a prayer practice.

Fasting is a practice known not only to Jews but to all of the world's monotheistic religions. For example, Indonesian Muslims fast from dawn to dusk throughout the month of Ramadan (a season of spiritual reflection and almsgiving).² Christians continued the practice of fasting that we inherited from our Jewish forebears. Fasting was often a form of personal devotion expressed by religious people like the early Desert Fathers and

² Exceptions are made for people who are ill, for nursing mothers and young children, and for travelers.

Mothers, or as a prophetic witness like the biblical prophets. I have known a few Christian social activists over the years who have fasted as a form of protest, as a means of gaining greater insight, and as a way of inviting others into their cause.

One friend of mine, Kip Tiernan,³ the co-founder of the Poor People's United Fund, fasted for the forty days of Lent in 1990, in response to the implosion of funding sources for organizations serving the poor and addressing the root causes of poverty in the city of Boston. She announced a 40-day fast, and extended an open invitation to the entire city to pray, fast, and converse with her about solutions to end poverty in Boston.

Though Kip's vision of a world without poverty has yet to be fulfilled, she has made a world of difference for poor people in Boston by laying the spiritual and physical cornerstone of several non-profit organizations that have been transitioning poor people from homelessness to housing, from welfare to work, and from illness to health, for over 50 years.

So, this Lenten season or any season when we find ourselves in the need of more clarity, we might consider fasting. As part of discerning whether fasting is right for us, it's important to talk with our physician before beginning a season of fasting, and to get good advice about how prepare for entering into a fast, and how to gently break the fast.

VI

If fasting is not your thing, perhaps scripture study is more "you." In reading Matthew, we learn that Jesus was very familiar with scripture. We might say that "he really knew his Bible," except the Bible hadn't been published yet. Torah and a few of the prophet's scrolls were Jesus' scripture—all of which are now include in what Christians call the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament.

I realize that many of you are thinking, "Yeah, yeah, but the Bible is boring." Or "the Bible is hard to understand." Or "I don't really see how the Bible relates to my life."

I'm sympathetic to persons who feel this way, and I also invite you to take another look. Consider a different approach to scripture this time. Don't try reading the Bible cover to cover. The Bible is a collection of books. It was never intended to be read like a novel from start to finish. Start by reading along in your pew Bibles every Sunday, and by reading the lectionary texts during the week that are listed in the early issues of our monthly newsletter, *Chimes*. Practice reading these weekly texts each day, and allowing yourself even five minutes of meditation and reflection on each one.

Buy a Bible with scholarly introductions to each chapter and with footnotes and other learning tools. Also consider reading an introductory book about the Bible, before you try diving in. (See me for a short list of accessible options and authors.) Ask me questions. Send me an email. In short, I suspect that you'll find that the more intention you

³ <http://www.ppuf.org/about/kip.asp>

put forth in reading, praying, and understanding the Bible, the more of a resource it will become for your life.

VII

That said, I realize that we are a diverse people, so maybe neither fasting nor scripture study are your thing. Then consider spending some time in the desert (or wilderness). Such places can provide the space and opportunity needed to get right with God, to discern what is good and true for you, and to find how best to live out your values amidst the myriad of challenges you face every day.

There are many ways to enter the desert or wilderness. Cross-cultural study suggests that it wasn't just Jewish prophets, like Jesus, or early Christians who found desert dwelling to be a spiritually enriching experience. Similar practices can be found in other cultures, such as the Inuit of the Pacific Northwest and Canada, and North American plains natives (Indians).

Generally speaking, these native cultures practice "vision quest," which is an experience undertaken by a child before puberty as a means of "finding themselves" and their respective vocation. When an older child is ready, he or she reports this decision to the community and goes on a personal, spiritual quest alone in the wilderness. This experience usually lasts for a number of days, and often includes fasting, while the child is particularly tuned into the natural and spirit world.

In some native cultures, the belief is that a guardian animal will come in a vision or dream to the child, and the child will gain clarity about his/her life direction. Once the child has reached that clarity, s/he will return to the tribe and pursue that direction in life. After a vision quest, the child may apprentice with an adult in the tribe who is able to help them develop the skills for their particular calling.⁴

Few of us grew up in cultures that practice vision quests, yet I suspect that many of us have found desert or wilderness experiences helpful, holistic experiences. Just this past week, for example, I received an email from a friend of mine who mentioned that he will be going on his eleventh annual backpacking sojourn in Death Valley over Presidents' Weekend. Similarly, another friend, a few years back, marked his 50th birthday by canoeing the Boundary Waters between Canada and the US.

A further example of the role of outdoor experiences in spiritual growth is evidenced in our UCC outdoor ministries programs. Church camps, which are often located in Spartan, remote settings, provide people of all ages—but particularly children and youth—with spiritual experiences that pull participants away from the distractions of our high-tech, fast-paced urban life to low-tech, slow-mo' outdoor experiences. Of course, church camp is anything but a solitary experience, because half of the draw for our kids to attend is making new and lasting friendships; but most of our camping experiences do of-

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vision_quest

fer some individual quiet time to encourage our kids to listen to and hear the still, small voice of God whispering in their hearts.

The gift that vision quests or similar experiences offer is a context that requires us to go not only to the quiet places in our world, but to the quiet places inside of ourselves, so that the voice of God and the voice of truth within us can be heard, as we plumb the most pressing questions or challenges in our lives, and/or perhaps discover that what we thought was so pressing, in the end, matters little as more salient priorities surface within us.

VIII

I wonder what questions or challenges are on our hearts today. What questions or challenges are worthy of going into an intentional period of prayer about, perhaps through fasting, scripture reading, desert dwelling or wilderness walking? Are those questions or challenges similar to the ones that Jesus grappled with?

- ◆ Are we tempted to use the wrong means to achieve a good end?
- ◆ Are we tempted to use our God-given power for nefarious purposes?
- ◆ Are we tempted to exchange loyalty to God for earthly gain?
- ◆ All of the above?
- ◆ Or are our questions or challenges of a different nature than the ones with which Jesus grappled?

Chances are we are regularly confronted by one or more of these challenges and more. So the question, then, is not whether we're challenged—whether we face temptation—but how we resolve our challenges—our temptations—and how we situate ourselves in such a way that we stay strong, like Jesus, so that we cannot only discern right from wrong, but do what is right, what is good, and what is fitting.

My prayer for each of us is that we may find a practice in this season of Lent that will provide the healthy context we need for moral discernment, and that we might have the courage of our convictions, to live virtuous lives. Amen.