



“Strong Amidst the Struggle”

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Mt. 4:1:1–11 (NRSV)***

The Christian season of Lent began this past week with the Ash Wednesday Service held in Pioneer Chapel. One of the three synoptic versions of Christ’s temptations always appears as the Gospel lection on the first Sunday of Lent each year.¹

This year’s gospel reading 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. His second temptation was to use his God-given power for the devil’s purposes. And his third temptation was to trade his loyalty to God for earthly gain.

Matthew’s account of the temptations moves quickly, and his description of the temptations seems, at least to me, more like a series of haikus than a series of logical syllogisms, so I’m going to slow things down a bit, explain the temptations one at a time, and offer a contemporary example of each to help build our comprehension and understanding of this passage, and this important event in the life of Christ, for all of us.

In Act 1, Scene 1 of “The Last Temptations of Christ,” Matthew describes the first temptation like this:

“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)—using the wrong means.

The arrest and arraignment last month of Norman Wielsch, former commander of the Contra Costa County Narcotics Task Force, comes to mind as a contemporary example of someone who tried to turn stones into bread.

¹ The synoptic gospels are: Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Norman Wielsch was charged with 28 felony counts for the theft and sale of narcotics. In a statement to the press following Wielsch's arraignment, his attorney said that "... his client had become mired in debt after his daughter required a bone marrow transplant."² The attorney's statement implied that Wielsch was somewhat justified in his actions because he was using the proceeds from narcotics sales for a worthy purpose—paying off his daughter's medical expenses.

Jesus' first temptation, according to Matthew, was to turn stones to bread. His second was to prove that he was the Son of God by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Jerusalem Temple, and having the angels rescue him.

This time Jesus was tempted to use his God-given power for the devil's purposes, and prove that he had divine power—all for the amusement of the devil.

Most of us can probably think of examples, particularly when we were younger, when we were tempted to prove how tough, smart, or attractive we were. Some examples may include the following: accepting a challenge to drink another shot in order to prove we could hold our liquor, driving too fast to show that we had the hottest car, getting into a fight in order to settle a score, cheating on a test in an attempt to get a better grade, or losing our lunch in order to achieve or maintain a certain body weight or image.

Unfortunately, rather than proving or improving our prowess, intelligence, or image, these behaviors usually result in nasty hangovers, problems with law enforcement or school officials, or chronic health issues.

In Act 1, Scene III of Matthew's "The Last Temptations of Christ," Jesus was tempted to sacrifice his loyalty to God for worldly gain. Here in chapter 4, verses 8–9, 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.'"

The opportunities to worship false gods abound in our time, as they did in Jesus' day. Some examples of modern temptations to worship false gods include the temptation to participate in our consumption economy, which fosters a false sense of need for the next trend coming down the New York runways, the next gadget being unveiled at a Cupertino press conference, or the next car rolling off of a Detroit assembly line.

In Matthew's conclusion to Christ's temptations narrative, Jesus offers a faithful response to each temptation that the devil presents, and the dialogue closes with Jesus' saying, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship ... and serve only God.'" (4:10)

² <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2011/02/19/BAM81HQAB1.DTL>

II

To further understand today's gospel text, and to help us gain clarity for dealing with our own temptations in life, it's helpful to note the difference between perplexity and temptations. *Perplexity* has to do with confusion about the difference between right and wrong in a given situation. *Temptation*, by contrast, has to do with those times when we do know the difference between right and wrong, but feel drawn to behave in the wrong way.

Temptation is sometimes masked as perplexity, especially when we do the wrong thing and have to face the consequences. Consider, for example, whether you've ever heard or said something like this: "But officer, I didn't know that this was a 25 mile per hour speed zone." Or, "Gee, Mom, all of the other kids' parents are letting them do x."

Temptations, by their very nature, have a vortex that can pull us off course. Temptations can distract us from a healthy course of action and from what we know to be right and good. 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 the human struggle. His temptations were real and compelling for him. This is what we mean when we say in our *UCC Statement of Faith*, "... he [Jesus] came to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death, and reconciling the world to himself."³

It is precisely because Christ came in human form and squarely faced temptations and dealt with them in healthy ways that we find his life worthy of emulation. But how—how do we emulate his example? How do we avoid succumbing to human temptations?

III

Today's gospel reading reveals at least three ways to stay strong in the face of temptation. A key insight that flows from Jesus' example is to embrace a spiritual practice that is meaningful and helpful to us—one that enables us to get clearer about who we are, and what's right and good, so that we stay strong in the struggle and make healthy choices in life. In this way, we emulate Christ's wilderness experience, which was not only filled with challenges but, more importantly, was an occasion where he grew stronger by successfully meeting the challenges on his journey toward Jerusalem and the final weeks and days of his earthly life.

Fasting was, for example, one of the spiritual practices that would have been familiar to Jesus, because it was common practice in the Jewish tradition that he grew up in.

³ <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/statement-of-faith.html>

Christians continued the practice of fasting learned from our Jewish forebears. The early Desert Fathers and Mothers, for example, fasted regularly as a form of personal devotion.

Modern social justice leaders, like Cesar Chavez, also practiced the spiritual discipline of praying and fasting. In her book, *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope, and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's Farm Worker Movement*, author Miriam Pawel poignantly illustrates how Chavez regularly prayed and fasted each time the Farm Worker Movement faced a significant legal or political challenge.⁴ Chavez's devotion to God and to the cause of farm workers strengthened his resolve, and served to embolden his followers, who suffered many hardships while advocating for fair labor practices and a living wage.

One need not be Jesus, a Desert Father or Mother, or the leader of a social justice movement to pray and fast. Most of us could try these practices ourselves if we are so inclined. There are many contemporary resources available for guidance in these practices. Fasting, however, is not recommended for people with certain health challenges. If you're considering a fast, especially for a lengthy period of time, it's best to talk with a medical advisor and an experienced practitioner about how to prepare for, maintain, and break a fast.

IV

If fasting is not your thing, you might consider reading the Bible. 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, but I encourage you to give the Bible another chance. 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 the lectionary texts during the week that are listed in the monthly newsletter. Practice reading these texts each day, and allowing yourself five minutes of meditation and reflection time on each one to see what questions or insights may arise. Seek further information and insight about the aspects of scripture that are puzzling to you, and learn to live and love the questions that are raised for us through these sacred texts.

As a starting point, consider purchasing a Bible that includes a scholarly introduction to each book, and that includes footnotes and annotations and other teaching tools. Also, consider reading an introductory book that helps frame and ground your Bible study before diving in. See me for a short list of accessible options and authors. Ask me questions. Send me an email. In short, be more intentional about reading, praying, and understanding the Bible. And as you do, I suspect that you will find that the Bible is less mysterious to you, and a more helpful resource for your life.

⁴ Miriam Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope, and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's Farm Worker Movement* (Bloomsberry: New York, 2009), p. 41-47, 55-56, 125, 139-140, 314, 322, and 334.

If fasting and reading the Bible don't suit you, consider spending some time in the desert (or the wilderness), like Jesus did. These kinds of places can provide the space and opportunity needed to get right with God, to discern what is good and true, and to find how best to express your values amidst the myriad of challenges that you face.

There are many ways to enter the desert or wilderness, literally or metaphorically. 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 attuned to 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.⁵

Some examples in Western culture of vision-quest type of experiences include Outward Bound experiences, executive coaching expeditions, and participation in our own UCC outdoor ministries retreats and camps. Even walking our courtyard labyrinth can provide a vision-quest type experience for those without the opportunity to get out of the city.

The gift that these vision-quest experiences offer is the opportunity to reconnect with the earth, to find our center, and to hear the voice of God, so that we can remember who we are, and what we're called to be and do in the world.

Regardless of whether we choose prayer and fasting, prayer and scripture reading, or praying our way through the desert or wilderness, my hope for each of us this Lent is that we commit ourselves to some spiritual practice that nurtures our souls and strengthens our ability to discern the voice of God, and receive God's guidance so that we are better poised to make choices and live lives that ensure our own health and contribute to the health and well-being of our community. Amen.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vision_quest