

Vocations and Temptations

The First Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2020

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

After Jesus was baptized, he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 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." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. - Matthew 4:1-11

The story from Matthew's gospel that we just heard certainly stands alone in terms of drama. And we can easily imagine how it is meant to show us important aspects Christ's nature. And even after a first hearing, some of us may wonder about a take-home lessons for our own lives.

But the story takes on even greater meaning when seen in the context of what comes before and after it in Matthew's gospel. As the first line that we heard today reminds us, today's story is preceded by the baptism of Jesus. We celebrated that baptism seven weeks ago, and I proposed then that the baptism is largely about the vocation of Jesus. The story as Matthew tells it anticipates and inaugurates the earthly ministry of Jesus. Not long after, we hear that, "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" (Mark 4:17)

But in between the baptism and that proclamation is today's story. Having fasted for forty days and nights, Jesus is famished and vulnerable. And the devil, also called 'the tempter' here, knows how to exploit apparent weaknesses. Each of the three temptations with which Jesus is faced is very different. But Jesus recognizes their common motive. In each case, he is urged to misuse his divine authority for personal gratification. And in each case Jesus says no.

Theologically, this story uniquely illustrates both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. '... he was famished,' and he faced profound temptations, as we humans do. But the temptations end when Christ commands: "Away with you, Satan! ... and the devil left him ..." Here, Matthew foreshadows God's triumph over evil that will be conclusively demonstrated for all and for all time in Christ's resurrection.

This story, of course, also raises questions about the nature of evil, and the personification of evil in the devil, and how you and I do or do not understand evil and temptations in our own time and lives. I, for one, have never seen the tempter in the form of a wizened old monk with a crow's foot, as is shown in the 16th century image on this morning's bulletin cover. Even so, I do not dismiss the realm of the demonic and it's very real manifestations, both insidious and overt, in our world and lives.



Temptation of Christ, Simon Bening, ca. 1525,
Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Saying more than that here, however, could lead us into a labyrinth of speculation and interpretations and nuances that I don't feel able to navigate in one sermon. And in any case, such speculation can become its own temptation, leading us into the realm of the abstract and steering us away from looking directly at our own reason for being, our own lived faith and dreams, and the obstacles and temptations that can lead to warfare in our own hearts.

One faithful response to today's gospel story may be to take out a blank sheet of paper, and to write down in black and white what we imagine we have been baptized to do, so to speak. What is our vocation? And if we aren't sure, who can help us clarify it?

Or maybe that project is too daunting, in which case perhaps we may be able to identify one important work of love or justice or creativity or forgiveness that seems to be of God and that we can reasonably imagine God is calling us to—but that we have not yet begun or are struggling to move forward.

If we have that clarity, we may also be able to see and name and write down the three or so most apparent, or apparently intractable, or constantly self-sabotaging temptations or obstacles that stand in the way of our calling, our gift, our intention. Most of us won't include on these lists a medieval image of a lurking tempter. We may in fact name things that we imagine to be spiritually neutral: apathy, or procrastination, or fear, or some mental health burden. We may feel the impact of some long ago abuse that still confines us. Or the addiction or sick attachment that we thought we'd overcome; but lately it's returned, there in the nearby shadows.

Whatever the temptations or obstacles, we may often feel all alone in them, as if in some wilderness. To be sure, each of us has our own unique life and calling, and our own unique challenges, unlike any other. So in some sense, we *are* alone. On the other hand, others have been in the wilderness before us. Jesus has been there, of course. But also others we know: those who have inspired, taught and encouraged us, those who showed up and did not leave us in the time of trial, those who by their examples defined perseverance for us.

Still others are known to us by their place in history. One example who comes to my own mind today is Nelson Mandela, who once said, "*Do not judge me by my successes. Judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.*" Another time he said, "*It always seems impossible until it's done.*"

I included that last quote because impossible can be another temptation for some of us. Why bother? It can't be done. No one thinks I can do it. It's too hard.

But do we intend to take all of our fears and temptations and obstacles with us to the grave? Or are we able to join Jesus in the wilderness of it all, wondering if his example and the examples of others who have been there may help us to get back up again, to know when and how to look to God and to persevere, finding our way through and beyond what seemed impossible.

We may later have a good story to tell. We may later even be quotable. Most importantly, we will have done our best in faith to do what we believe God has given us to do. *Amen.*