

Scriptures: Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

Ash Wednesday

This previous Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, which marked the beginning of Lent. We had a fairly good turn-out for the WOW meal and the worship service, I think there were close to thirty people here. Thanks to all of you who attended or helped with that. Your faithfulness and willingness to be the hands and feet of Jesus is appreciated and inspiring

Of all the worship services on the Church calendar, Ash Wednesday is the one with which I have the hardest time. And not because of the call to penitence – we need that every day! Ash Wednesday is about change. Specifically, the change that all of us will inevitably face – our own mortality. It is a guaranteed thing, assuming Jesus doesn't return in the meantime, 100% of all people will die. Putting the ashes on your foreheads, telling you "From dust you came and to dust you shall return," is hard. I love you all, and even though I know – we know – we're secure in Jesus Christ because we trust Him as our Savior, contemplating on the temporary absence we experience when people we love pass on and leave us behind causes real pain.

During the Lenten season many people do various practices to draw nearer to God, such as fasting, Scripture reading, and prayer. These are things which we can do at any time of the year, we just hear most about them during the season of Lent. I don't know if you've decided to give something up for Lent or not, but usually, whatever it is, when you see it, it can be very enticing! Earlier this morning we heard about the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve – and by extension, the rest of us – and this morning we're going to examine the temptation of Jesus Christ. Pay close attention to the differences between those two Bible stories, and see what you notice. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 4:1-11. **Read Matthew 4:1-11.**

Temptation and Fall of Adam and Eve

From the Biblical narrative we don't know how long Adam and Eve were in Eden prior to their temptation by the serpent. He just kind-of pops into the story, and leads Eve astray first, and then her husband, Adam. In Matthew's account of Jesus' temptation, it happens immediately after His baptism. So it's at the very beginning of His public ministry. Notice too, what we're told in the first verse: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." Satan doesn't just pop up, like he does in the Genesis account – Jesus, led by the Holy Spirit, goes out to him in the desert.

“After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry,” (4:2), Matthew records next. That’s a long fast! It’s also the length of the Lenten season, excluding Sundays. How would you feel after a forty day fast? Nowadays people fast from a variety of things, like food – or specific types of it, such as chocolate – electronics, just about anything you can imagine. The gospel account doesn’t tell us the specifics of what Jesus fasted from, although there are at least two things He didn’t have during these forty days – food, and His disciples. Now, in the Genesis account, we aren’t told if Adam and Eve had been fasting – I suspect they probably were not.

Matthew tells us, “The tempter came to Him and said, ‘If You are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread,’” (verse 3). There’s a couple things at play here. First off, Satan knows Jesus is the Son of God – there’s no questioning that. When we have stuff going on, what usually happens? We start doubting, don’t we? When we do a light reading of the text, we may jump to the conclusion that Satan may be trying to plant a little bit of doubt into the mind of Christ about who He really is. Friends, that’s pretty laughable, almost absurd. It’s a big waste of time for Satan to try to plant doubts into the mind of Christ regarding Christ’s own identity.

If You Are the Son of God...

What’s really being said here is “Since You are the Son of God,” in other words, “Jesus, You are the Son of God, use Your power to turn these stones into loaves of bread and satisfy Your hunger.” See friends, what Satan’s getting at here in his first temptation of Jesus is to have Jesus use His power, as God, to serve a self-seeking purpose. Notice how Jesus responds. “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God,’” (verse 4). Now that’s actually a quote from the Bible. It comes from the last half of Deuteronomy 8:3, which says, “He [God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

See, Jesus, in saying this, is counting on the Father to provide for His need for food, rather than on using His own ability to miraculously create food. Interestingly, the Scriptures call manna, “Bread from heaven,” which is exactly what Jesus is for us! There’s so much great stuff in the Old Testament – if we ignore it or don’t pay attention to it, we shortchange ourselves because we limit our own understanding of the complexity of who Jesus is, and what He’s done on our behalf.

“Then the devil took Him to the holy city and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple,” (Matt. 4:5), Matthew tells us next. The holy city Matthew’s talking about here is Jerusalem, of course, because that’s where the temple was. We’ve talked some about the temple before. It was a massive structure. You can go to Jerusalem today and see sort of the foundation stones of it – it’s what the Jewish people call “The

Wailing Wall.” They go there to say prayers, and sometimes they even write prayers on little pieces of paper that they shove into the cracks between those gigantic stones.

They Will Lift You Up

The temple was the tallest structure in the city – it was actually built on the top of a mountain. The temple was destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans. During the Middle Ages, the Muslims took over Jerusalem and built a mosque on it, which is called “the Dome of the Rock.” Muslims can go into that mosque today and see the mountain top coming out of the center of the floor (picture:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d5/Temple_area%2C_Mosque_of_Omar_%28i.e.%2C_Dome_of_the_Rock%29%2C_etc._Rock_Moriah%2C_from_the_south_LOC_matpc.23162.jpg).

At one point, the temple in Jerusalem stood 100 feet above the Kidron Valley. Bible scholars are not in agreement what the highest point of the temple was. If it was the part looking over the Kidron Valley with the retaining wall underneath it, or if it was at the very top of the actual temple itself – what’s known as the Holy of Holies, where God’s throne on earth sat. “If You are the Son of God,” the devil said, “throw Yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command His angels concerning You, and they will lift You up in their hands, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone,’” (verse 6). See friends, the devil’s a tricky fellow. He knows the Scriptures, too. He actually misquotes – or cuts out – a piece of Psalm 91, which says, “If you make the Most High your dwelling – even the Lord, who is my refuge – then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone,” (Ps. 91:9-12). See, it’s a promise God gives on the condition that we make Him our dwelling. And the piece Satan leaves out, “to guard you in all your ways,” is as important as what he includes.

God gives His angels commands to guard us in our ways when we make Him our dwelling place. That’s the gist of the Psalm. Instead, Satan’s trying to twist God’s words, to get Jesus to do something counter to the character of God. Look, the temple’s a busy place. There are people going in and out of there 365 days a year, 24 hours every single day. Someone in Jerusalem that day surely would have seen Jesus Christ, the Son of God, standing at the top of the temple – and if He would have jumped, a whole lot of people would have been eyewitnesses to it! The temptation Satan’s using here isn’t for Jesus to harm Himself – it’s for Jesus to make a dramatic public display of who He is, by jumping, and calling 10,000 angels down to care for Him. To be proud, and boastful.

Massah and Meribah

And friends, those aren’t God’s characteristics. Those character traits – pride, boastfulness – they belong to our enemy. In trying to get Jesus to do the stuff Satan

does, to act the way Satan acts, Satan's trying to make a point in saying that God isn't any better than he is – and we know that's not right! So how does Jesus respond? "Jesus answered him, 'It is also written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test,'" (Matt. 4:7), which is again another quote, also from the book of Deuteronomy. When you look at the verse Jesus quotes, it reads, "Do not test the Lord your God as you did at Massah," (Deut. 6:16).

It's a reference to a time when Moses and the ancient Israelites were on the way to the Promised Land, and God's people started fussing about not having water to drink. Way back in Exodus 17, you can find this story. Moses prays to God after the people are kicking up their heels, and God tells him to take his staff and hit the rock, and water will come out of it. And Moses did what God told him to do. "And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" (Ex. 17:7).

Looking at these temptations, it's interesting that they tie back into some very basic things – bread, or food, and now water. Jesus is the only One who can quench the thirsting of our souls! Well, the devil's not done quite yet with Jesus. "Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor," (Matt. 4:8). We don't know which mountaintop to which Satan took Jesus. Even if they went to Mount Everest, they wouldn't be able to see the whole world. I don't know geography-wise, if there's a mountain over there in the Middle East which would allow them to see a lot of different countries or not.

If You Fall Down

You know, here in the United States, you can go to Lookout Mountain in Georgia, and they have a little plaque there, which tells you where to look to see seven States. From that mountain, if you have nice, clear day, and perfect eye sight, you can see Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. So maybe it was someplace like that. "'All this I will give You,' he said, 'if You will bow down and worship me,'" (verse 9).

Satan's been trying to masquerade as God for millennia. In the book of Ezekiel, we're told this:

"You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared. You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled

you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings,” (Eze. 28:12-17).

Similarly, Isaiah tells us this about the origin of Satan:

“How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’ But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of Sheol,” (Isa. 14:12-15).

Satan’s wanted to take God’s place on the throne of heaven ever since he allowed the sin of pride to creep into his heart. He sees an opportunity to get Jesus – God-in-human-flesh – who’s weakened from being in the desert, without food for 40 days and nights – to bow down and worship him. So the master of manipulation, the father of lies, says to Jesus, “All this I’ll give You, if You bow down and worship me,” (Matt. 4:9). That must have been quite a powerful temptation with which our Lord had to wrestle in that moment! He had come to bring God’s Kingdom near – to draw all people to Himself – and here’s an easy way out. Satan’s giving Him an opportunity to take the easy path, rather than the one which ends on the cross.

God Is Faithful

What does Jesus do? He says, “Away from Me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only,’” (verse 10). Here again, Jesus quotes the word of God – Holy Scripture. It actually comes from the book of Deuteronomy, “Fear the Lord your God, serve Him only and take your oaths in His name,” (Deut. 6:13). It’s from the Old Testament, and Jesus quotes it. Friends, I hope these last few weeks when we’ve been talking about how important the Old Testament was and is, that you’re taking it to heart! It’s Jesus’ go-to for responses when He’s being tempted by Satan – that should tell us something of its importance!

As our Scripture passage ends, we’re told, “then the devil left Him, and angels came and attended Him,” (Matt. 4:11). Jesus, who had God’s word contained in the Old Testament, and who was and is God’s living Word, didn’t fall for the temptations thrown at Him by the slick old devil, unlike our ancestral parents. God-in-the-flesh knew He had a mission to accomplish that would restore the whole creation to Himself through His shed blood and broken body. There was no way to shortcut the process. We fall into temptation and sin, and so, we need Someone who perfectly sinless to be able to take the fall for us. Only Jesus Christ does that.

When we are unfaithful – and we are, all the time – but God is always faithful. The writer of Hebrews describes it this way:

Since the children have flesh and blood, Jesus shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels He helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason He had to be made like His brothers in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted. Therefore, you who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest whom we confess, (Heb. 2:14-3:1).

Church, aren’t you glad to know that Jesus has been through it all with you? He takes great care of us! Thanks be to God!

Prayer: God of mercy, Your word was the sure defense of Jesus in His time of testing. Minister to us in the wilderness of our temptation, that we who have been set free from sin by Christ may serve You well into life everlasting. Amen.