

A View from Above
A sermon preached by
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Matthew 4:1-11 (CEB)

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. ²After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. ³The tempter came to him and said, “Since you are God’s Son, command these stones to become bread.”

⁴Jesus replied, “It’s written, People won’t live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.”^[a]

⁵After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, ⁶“Since you are God’s Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won’t hit your foot on a stone.”^[b]

⁷Jesus replied, “Again it’s written, Don’t test the Lord your God.”^[c]

⁸Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹He said, “I’ll give you all these if you bow down and worship me.”

¹⁰Jesus responded, “Go away, Satan, because it’s written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”^[d] ¹¹The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

I think it is difficult to live in the 21st century and make much sense of the Gospel story this morning, at least if you are trying to interpret this passage in a literal way. Not many of us claim to have been tempted by a flesh and blood devil and if we did, it’s likely that we’d be spending a little time in a locked room.

If you consult the source of all knowledge, Google, and search on the personification of evil, you get everyone from Rick Santorum to LeBron James; not much help there. So, I think it’s important to say outright that this story is a symbolic representation of a truth that the gospel writers are trying to convey. And its importance to us isn’t wrapped up in questions about the personification of evil. Instead, its importance is conveyed to us through an examination of Jesus’ life and ministry and how he confronted temptations to be something or someone that was less than the person that God would have him be.

The word Satan or devil came from Persia, where it designated the role of a secret-service agent who worked undercover testing subjects' loyalty to the king. In the Hebrew scriptures, this role was borrowed to describe the origin of tests of loyalty to God in Israel. By about 300 years before Jesus' time, Satan had assumed an anti-God role, recruiting anti-God persons on his own behalf. These temptations became both a testing and a recruiting device,¹ so built into the character of Satan is the assumption that a testing is taking place.

William Lloyd Allen writes that this scene might be best understood in the context of Jesus as a young adult at the start of his public ministry. He is wrestling in the wilderness with the exact nature of his vocation. Like many young adults, this wilderness wrestling is about seeking identity and true calling. What is the method and purpose of Jesus' life? What are the foundational principles that this life will be built upon.²

In this way, Jesus' wilderness experience is something that sets the stage for his future life and ministry. The answers are different on different occasions, but the choices are very much the same:

- Jesus refuses in the desert to turn stones into bread to fill his own hunger, but before long he will feed thousands in the wilderness with just a few loaves and some fish.
- He refuses to take advantage of his relationship to God by hurling himself down from the heights of the Temple, but at the end of his earthly ministry he endures the taunts of others while trusting God's power as he hangs on a Roman cross.
- He turns down the devil's offer of political leadership over the world, and instead offers the kingdom of heaven to all those who follow him.

Set between his baptism and the beginning of his public ministry, the wilderness tests of the temptation account are not a one-time ordeal to get through, they are tests of preparation for the choices Jesus makes in his earthly ministry. They provide a *view from above* that gives perspective and guidance for the rest of his ministry. And in this way, the story is helpful to us

¹ Malina and Rohrbaugh, **Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels**, Fortress Press, 2003, pp. 36-37.

² William Lloyd Allen, "The Devil at the Crossroad," **Review and Expositor**, 1992, pp. 539-530.

as we confront a life that is filled with temptations of its own. Most of them are not coming as apples hanging from a tree. Instead they are subtle messages that seek to undermine our identity and invite us to forget whose we are. So many commercials suggest we are inadequate. So many headlines suggest that there is not enough to go around. And so many politicians – of all parties – contend that we have a great deal to fear. In the face of these identity-obscuring messages, we have the opportunity to root ourselves in the same baptismal promise that safeguarded and empowered Jesus. This is the baptismal promise that reminds us that God says we are so totally enough, that there is plenty to go around, and that we need not live in fear.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that, “Lent comes along and we give up things that are bad for us or take on things that are good for us, as if the most serious temptations in life were to drink too much scotch or to eat too much fat or stay in bed on Sunday morning. But that is not what Jesus’ stories of temptation are about. I do not think they are about the temptation not to be a good human being. Instead, I think they are about the temptation not to be a human being at all.”³

Every time we come to this table, we are given this gift, something that we receive rather than creating on our own. It comes as an offering and a promise. And in this promise we are reminded that you only know who you are when you realize whose you are, God’s beloved children, who have been given value, worth, and purpose. May we use this gift well. .

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Remaining Human*, The Christian Century, February 7-14, 1996, p. 127.