**SERMON Matthew 4:1-11**

**INTRODUCTION**

Temptation. We all experience it, not once or twice, but multiple times a day in a myriad of different ways. For, no matter how committed we are to eating healthy, swinging through the Wendy’s drive-through on the way home can seem appealing. And, even though we’ve decided not to spend more money this month on random things, we find ourselves scrolling through Amazon and clicking the “add to cart” button. Or, when a colleague at work does something to completely undermine, undo or take credit for our hard work, it takes everything in us not to publicly call them out. Or, at school, when we see another kid getting picked on or talked about behind their backs, it’s all too easy just to walk on by and convince ourselves that it’s not nothing to do with us. Temptations come in all shapes and sizes. AND they take on *particular* significance in the lives of Christ-followers, children of God called to be Kingdom-heralders in this world. Temptation lurks, it’s insidious, often disguised but always close at hand.

Our passage today reveals both the humanity of Jesus, as well as his power. It shows us that: 1) Jesus understands and has experienced what it feels like to be tempted, and 2) Jesus is also the means, and the power through which, we are able to *work through* the temptation.

**LITERARY CONTEXT – MATTHEW**

At his baptism, Jesus was declared by God, “My Son,” “The Beloved” and “with whom I am well pleased.” Importantly, these declarations were made *before* Jesus had even begun his ministry, before a single miracle had been performed or even one word of his great teachings had been uttered. The voice from heaven was plain, **God was pleased in ‘who Jesus was’** not **‘what Jesus had done**.’ This may be a subtle distinction, but an important one I think, especially given what happens next. For with the Divine baptismal pronouncements publicly and profoundly made, Jesus *still* did not begin his ministry right away. It seems that **something else was needed**. Instead of beginning his work straight from the waters of the Jordan River, he was led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness to be tempted.

**CANONICAL CONTEXT – MATTHEW**

Now, we know from scripture that the wilderness is the place where one’s true allegiances are made known. Yahweh led the people of Israel into the wilderness to prepare them to be a people *set apart* for God. And when they began to grumble and complain to Moses, Aaron and Miriam (Exodus 16:1-7), Yahweh had to remind them that their allegiance was to the God *who had freed them from slavery in Egypt*. The time that the people of Israel spent wandering in the wilderness was to be a formative time, a time to teach them ‘who they were,’ ‘whose they were’ and ‘who they were to become.’

These resonances from the Hebrew Scriptures ought to be in our mind’s eye, as Jesus steps into the wilderness in our New Testament text.

**THE TROUBLE IN MATTHEW**

The Spirit of God led Jesus into the wilderness, where he would be tempted to question what was pronounced at his baptism. *“Am I really who God says I am?” “Am I really Beloved?”* These very human, existential questions would cause Jesus to doubt the very path God had placed before him. A path that we know, would ultimately lead to the cross.

And isn’t this so true to life. We don’t change our end goal, but along the way we are tempted to deviate just a little. *<gesture with hands.* But those deviations over time amplify and lead us farther away from the goal that we ever intended.

So, in the temptations Jesus faces, we see a detailed array of potential deflections and misdirections, attempts to distract, to undermine, to deny, and refuse “The Way of the Cross,” the Way God had set before him. They lead other ways.

The writer of Matthew says that Jesus is approached by “the devil,” “the tempter,” a figure that resists God’s baptismal affirmations and commission. The word “devil” in Greek is *diabolos*, and it is composed of two separate words, *dia* meaning “through,” or “around” and *bollo* meaning “to throw,” where our word ‘ball’ comes from. *Diabolos*, the devil, means ‘one who throws things about’ –one who stirs things up– and gets them confused.

The work of the devil, at least in this passage it seems, is to get Jesus muddled. The father of lies (who births falsehoods and scatters them about), the slanderer, the accuser of the saints, then, is really the ‘Great Confuser.’

And confusion has been a tactic of “The Tempter,” from the very beginning. Seeding the question: “Did God *really* say…?” (Gen 3:1). The Confuser’s scheme is for Jesus to forget who he is and what he is on earth to do.

The **first temptation** to turn stones into loaves of bread is an invitation is to *seek first his own needs and appetites*. To join the enemies of the cross whose “god is the belly” like it says in the letter to the Philippians (3:19). To confuse self-satisfaction and self-preservation with God’s will and God’s purpose. This is a formidable temptation, especially at a time when Jesus is hungry and vulnerable in his humanness.

The **second temptation** is to showmanship, a way of exploiting his position and power as the Son of God. *“Did God really say, “My Son, My Beloved,”?* This is an invitation is to *exploit power and make a public display of it*. The Great Confuser might as well have said, “Jesus, why don’t you kickstart your ministry with a show of power that no one can deny? Give the masses what they want.” This temptation attempts to pull on the thread of insecurity. The thread that might just undermine Jesus’ confidence in his identity as God’s Son and resolve as *our* Lord and Savior.The idea is to confuse the real work of the Kingdom –loving, healing and forgiveness– with flashing acts that boost the ego rather than point to the glory and honor of God.

The **third temptation** is more an out-and-out bribe than temptation. IF only Jesus would *give his allegiance to* diabolos, then *diabolos* would give him power *over* all the kingdoms of earth. But this is not the power of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God turns all of our understandings of human power upside-down. The Kingdom that Jesus is called to inaugurate raises up the powerless, the downtrodden and whose citizens practice ‘power with’ not ‘power over.’

This three-way assault was for one end, to destabilize Jesus; to throw him off course; to distrust God; to tempt him to take, not the “Way of the Cross,” but a different way, the way of the world, of Empire, of human kingdoms and not the Kingdom of God.

And this plays out, because what happens in the wilderness does not stay in the wilderness; rather, the temptations show up in the life and ministry of God’s beloved child (Matt 3:17). The conflict between Jesus and the devil is not to be reduced to one scene, and although the answers are different on different occasions, the choices are very much the same:

Jesus refuses in the desert to turn stones into bread to assuage his own hunger, but before long he will feed thousands in the wilderness with just a few loaves and some fish (Matt 14:17-21; 15:33-38), and he will teach his disciples to pray to God for their “daily bread” (Matt 6:11).

He refuses to take advantage of his relationship to God, exploiting his connection with the all-powerful, by hurling himself down from the heights of the Temple, but at the end of his earthly ministry he endures the taunts of others (Matt 27:38-44) while trusting God’s power to point of death (Matt 27:46).

He turns down the devil’s offer of power *over* the kingdoms of the world, and instead offers the opportunity for a divine-human relationship, extending the Kingdom of God to all those who follow him.

**THE TROUBLE TODAY**

We know that conflict with the devil is not limited to this story, it is the underlying aspect of the conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of humans, often characterized in our Bibles as the Empire. This conflict is the plot of the whole Gospel of Matthew. *Throughout* the Gospel, God is the hidden actor, and Satan is the hidden opponent resisting the Kingdom of God. And, are we not subject to similar assaults today? Do we not find ourselves vulnerable to confusion and forgetfulness in the face of 21st-century temptations to prioritize our own needs, to exploit our own power or proximity to power, and to give our allegiance -not to God and the values of the Kingdom of God-, but to make an idol out of ourselves and our own interests. Temptation is ever-present, sometimes disguised as ‘good’ things or the ‘smart, rational choice’ but will cause us to deviate from God’s course.

**THE GOOD NEWS IN MATTHEW**

The three temptations have to do with earthly power and glory. In each case Jesus responds by quoting from the book Deuteronomy. Harking back again to the Israelites in the wilderness, who were tempted to forget that they were God’s Chosen People. Tempted to complain and ‘take matters into their own hands’ when things got tough:

* Jesus’ response to *satisfy his own needs* is from Deuteronomy 8:3: “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” A reminder that when God tested the Israelites in the wilderness, he fed them with manna in order to make them understand that they needed to trust that God would provide. That meeting physical needs along does lead to a flourishing life.
* The temptation to *exploit power* wasmet withDeuteronomy 6:13: “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” This quote is from Moses’ address to the people of Israel prior to entering Canaan, reminding them not to forget *who* gave them the land, because it wasn’t by any merit or strength of their own, it was a gift of God.
* Finally, Jesus responses to the temptation to *rule over* from Deuteronomy 6:16: “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

In each instance, Jesus’ response to each *diabolic* temptation was to recount all the times the Patriarch Moses had to remind to the people of Israel of who they were and what they were called to do.

**THE GOOD NEWS TODAY**

*And* where the Israelites would falter, Jesus would not hesitate. He was tested concerning all that God had pronounced at his baptism > that he was indeed “God’s Son,” and God’s “Beloved,” called and commissioned to reconcile people with their Creator and usher in the Heavenly Kingdom. **All** of which would put him at odds with *earthly* powers and *human* values. BUT he responded –not simply by plucking scripture out of thin air– but by thoughtfully reminding himself of God’s past faithfulness to the people of Israel. And in doing so, Jesus stayed the course. He remembered that is identity was secure and his calling was good. This is good news for us!

Because we know, that what happens in the wilderness does not stay in the wilderness. Throughout our lives, our identities as “Beloved Children of God” will be tested. The Great Confuser, *diabolos* tries to get us muddled and confused, so that we doubt and deviate from God’s will and purpose for our lives.

BUT take courage, dear friends and walk through the wildernesses of this world, in the knowledge and power of Jesus. The one who, was tempted as we are, and intimately knows our struggles. Jesus is the one who reminds us that God is always faithful and always loving…it is a truth as steadfast today as it was for the Ancients.

So, as we close today, I pray that you find both hope and courage in the God who called not only Jesus, but all of us, *Beloved Children* so that we, also, might remember *who* we are, and *whose* we are and *what* we are here to do.

Amen.