

At the Crossroads ... where temptation meets salvation

Lesson: **Matthew 4:1-11**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%204:1-11>

Would you all stand up for a minute, and stretch out your arms. Notice how your arms point to other people, the walls, the world? Notice that your head points to the sky, to what lies beyond the visible, and your feet are planted on the ground? Now notice that your heart lies in the middle, at the intersection between the two? Think about that horizontal plane as representing the time-bound, visible, scientific, human, and the vertical plane as representing the eternal, invisible, experiential, divine. At the intersection of the horizontal human and the vertical divine is your heart, your soul. We all live as the crossroads between the human and the divine. Jesus lived as the One in whom the intersection between human and the divine resolved. For the next few weeks we're going to be looking at how Jesus lives out that intersection, how the Cross gave it meaning, and how we might learn to follow Jesus in living at the Crossroads.

You can sit down now, or stand, whichever you like.

In the church we are observing the season of Lent. Lent is 40 days, memorializing the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness fasting and praying. For centuries, people have followed the Way of Jesus by also spending 40 days fasting and praying. Most of us who practice fasting give up one or two foods or activities for those 40 days. One of the purposes of doing this is that when we are tempted by the foods or activities, we learn to lean on God to get through. If we fast but we don't do that second part — learning on God when we feel tempted — the fast is useless as a spiritual practice. The idea is not that we should simply feel deprived or deprived, but that we learn from the experience of hunger and temptation.

Let's say that you are fasting from chocolate, or that you're not buying anything new. When the craving for chocolate arises, or you see the saber saw at OSH, the fast reminds you that a) you don't need the chocolate, but b) you need God. The next step at that moment of temptation is to pray, or to read a scripture passage of support and strength.

Take out a pen or a pencil, and jot down some of your temptations. There are paper and pens in the pews. Don't spend a lot of time thinking about it — just write down whatever comes to mind that you would classify as a temptation in your daily life. No one is going to see this but you; it's just helpful to write it down. Hang onto that.

You probably wrote down fairly mundane temptations: foods, hobbies, habits. The ones we think of first are usually the "temptations of the flesh". They are terribly annoying, and many of them can actually injure us when we indulge them, but it might be useful to think of these kinds of temptation as a gift from God. The smaller temptations allow us to practice leaning on God. Then, when the time comes that our souls are truly threatened, we have had a taste of salvation through our practice. We already know how to turn to the Savior for help.

There are times and situations in everyone's life where the temptation is greater and more harmful to the health of our souls than a Hershey bar or a saber saw or a cigarette. When we find ourselves in the dark wilderness of our souls, it is far better to have already discovered the light of salvation than to have to feel around for it in the dark.

How does God's salvation from temptation work? We can see God saving Jesus from temptation in today's story: After being baptized, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Jesus was led by the

Spirit. How do you lead someone? You walk ahead. For someone to lead you, she has to be in front of you. So the Spirit of the Lord God goes into the wilderness before Jesus. God goes on ahead, and Jesus follows. Then Jesus fasts and prays for 40 days. By doing this, he is learning to lean on God. He is building up his spiritual armor. After those 40 days, Jesus was famished. That's his human side, the horizontal plane, showing itself. Jesus is hungry.

The tempter shows up. He encourages the hungry Jesus to turn the stones into bread. That's the physical temptation, the human temptation. "Use your miraculous powers to make bread of stone." There are at least four temptations in this one little sentence:

1. **To feed his body.**
2. **To turn something that is not is not bread, into bread** – that is, to make something inconsequential into something essential.
3. **To give in to something that he knows is not right;** that is, to betray his better nature, and
4. **To feed the world.** For all of you who think Jesus's sole mission was to ease poverty and create justice, take note: He's given the opportunity to feed the world – by turning stone into bread, he could feed everyone in the world. Hunger would disappear forever.

That is a powerful temptation – to be able to feed your body, turn something that is unimportant into something important, to betray your better nature, and to feed the world. Here's how Jesus handles it: he goes back to Scripture. He returns to Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Torah and the Old Testament, where the same thing happened to his ancestors: the ancients were humbled with hunger and learned to live by trust in the word and the promises of God.¹ Jesus reminds the tempter that "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." He cannot turn the stones into bread if he is to maintain his relationship with God and himself, and so he turns to the word of God for sustenance.

Because he has immersed himself in study of the scriptures and in prayer, Jesus knows that God will provide not just for him, but for all people. So in the moment of temptation to betray both his purpose and his relationship with God, Jesus chooses to trust God.

So the tempter gets smarter. Jesus has quoted Scripture, and so now Scripture is quoted back to him. Jesus has leaned on the faithfulness of God, and so the tempter uses that. He takes Jesus up to the top of the temple, a very high place, and quotes the 91st Psalm. Here's how that psalm goes: "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who have made the Lord your refuge... no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For God will command his angels to guard you... they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."

Here's what the tempter is saying: "You say you trust in God? God will take care of you, right? Let's see if your God will spare you from pain. Try it out and see!"

What a temptation – to believe that a loving God would never allow you to get hurt. You love God. You trust God, and so God will spare you from pain. The tempter asks Jesus to believe that God would never allow him to feel pain, or to get hurt. And Jesus responds, again from Deuteronomy, that one shall not test God.²

And so the tempter, that challenger of our deepest souls, takes Jesus to a high mountain, from which he can see all the kingdoms of the world. And he says, "I will give you all these kingdoms, if you fall down

¹ Deuteronomy 8:3. "God humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

² Deuteronomy 6:16 "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah."

and worship me.” We know that Jesus has come to bring the kingdom of God to human beings, and to bring the earthly kingdoms to the divine King. This temptation cuts to the heart of Jesus’ purpose, his deepest nature.

1. It is not just the temptation of **earthly power** – Jesus would have everything in his control.
2. It is not just the temptation to **fulfill his mission** in one fell swoop: the kingdoms would belong to the king.
3. It is not just the temptation to **make an idol** – to worship someone or something other than God. It is not just those, which would be big enough. This temptation cuts at the very heart of faith:
4. when the tempter tells Jesus that he will give him the kingdoms, **the tempter is claiming that the kingdoms are his to give**. The real temptation here is that you will believe that someone or something **other than God** can give you what you most want.

The greatest temptation is to believe that the thing you most want, whether it’s power, or security, or peace, or success, or relief from pain is not God’s – and God’s alone – to give.

“Fall down and worship me”, says the darkness in our souls, “and I will give you whatever you want. Place me at the center of your life”, says our deepest pain, “and I will give you what you need.”

Our deepest pain, our darkest brokenness, begs to be placed at the center of our lives. And it tries to convince us that we will be happiest, most comfortable, and most powerful if we allow it to live in place of God.

The tempter – those “demon voices and distorted mirrors” – wants us to center our lives on our sickness and our hurt, instead of on our greatest strength. Our greatest temptation is to de-center the source of all our being and connection to others. Our greatest temptation is to remove God from the center of our lives.

What do you think was Jesus’ deepest temptation? His life’s purpose was to transform lives – to save souls – and to model obedient and intimate relationship with God. Was his greatest temptation to accomplish the merely human ends of triumph, justice and plenty? Was it to just have a normal life?

What is it that truly tempts you? What is the darkness in your soul? What is your wilderness place?

- § Has a sudden storm rocked your life and made you doubt whether there even is a God, and if so, whether it matters?
- § Does an ancient shame make you feel like a fraud?
- § Do the demons of guilt, or strained relationships, tempt you to stay too busy, just to avoid feeling and thinking?
- § Is the desire for security, for unchangingness, causing you to build a fortress around your heart?
- § Does disappointment or fear tear you away from connection and intimacy?
- § Are you tempted to trade your honor or your deepest beliefs in order to achieve something?

Take a look at that temptation list. Are these your **real** temptations? Or is there something else working right now to destroy you?

You may not even realize what your deepest temptation is. Eskimos kill a wolf simply by coating several layers of frozen blood onto a sharp knife sticking out of the frozen tundra. The wolf picks up the scent, and, after a time of mistrust, begins licking the frozen blood. In the wolf’s hunger for nourishment, he licks faster and faster. And in the cold and the power of the craving, he never notices that the blood he is licking has become his own. We can be destroyed not only by desires of the moment, but by the very things we use to quiet those deep and powerful hungers. Our worst temptations lie at the very heart of darkness, and slowly kill us with their familiar sweetness.

Our personal wilderness is found not in the daily lures of Hershey's bars and saber saws, but in the temptation to make bread what is not bread and to worship what is not God. The threat to our souls is not the drug, or the casual sex, or the cigarette, or the food, or the work. The threat to our souls is **despair that comes from believing that God promised us no pain**. The threat to our souls is valuing earthly outcomes — even justice, even peace, even the release from hunger — over the **divine salvation of a transformed spirit**. The threat to our souls is doing all the things we do to receive accolades and attention when what we really need to do is let the Spirit lead us, even into those places that terrify us and hurt to visit. Because every one of us is a hurting soul in need of healing. Every one of us is a wrongdoer in need of forgiveness. Everyone of us has been disappointed; everyone of us tried to do something and failed.

And there is nothing that we have experienced, no pain, no temptation, no loss that God in Jesus Christ has not visited first. Jesus has been there first. And in that intersection between the human and the divine, in that place where the heart of God lay nailed to the cross, comes the possibility of salvation. Because having been tempted, having been shamed, having been beaten, having been crucified, Jesus went into the tomb of humanity and came out with new life. And if God can bring new life out of that terrible end, God can bring you into new life.

You have to plant your feet into the foundation that is the word, and raise your eyes into eternity. You have to stretch out your hands to the people around you, and open yourself up to the saving grace of God. For it is where humanity and divinity meet, in the heart of Christ, that salvation lives.

Will you pray with me? Holy Jesus, there is someone in here who needs your healing. There is someone in here who needs your help. There is someone in here who right now is being tempted by the darkness of despair, or hopelessness, or shame. We know you've been there, Lord. We know you have gone on before us. And we know that when we follow your Way, we are more prepared to face the pain of living, and to embrace the joy of life. Salvation belongs to you; extend your saving grace to us, in this time and forever. Amen.