

March 1, 2020
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Walking in the Way of Jesus

Matthew 4:1-11

Introduction to Matthew: This story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is present in Matthew's gospel, Mark's gospel and Luke's gospel. And every time it appears it is right before the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It seems that this story is very important to understanding Jesus.

Beginning last Wednesday, the Christian community entered into the season of Lent. And, as your church staff planned for the observation of this season of Lent – the 40 days historically set aside for self-examination and preparation for the right celebration of Easter – we chose the theme “Walking in the Way of Jesus.” And it is our hope and invitation that all of us will spend some time evaluating how we live our lives and comparing it with the life, example and teachings of Jesus.

And, this story of Jesus' temptation, is one of the teachings about who Jesus is, how Jesus is going to work, and what Jesus is all about. In fact, I would say that what Matthew gives us – right up front- is a sort of truth in advertising statement.

You know how, in our culture, advertising of all sorts will present a product -drug commercials are the best example – that promises to fix all that ails us? But as the advertisement is fading on our screens, a voice comes in to detail all of the dangers, risks and side-effects of the drug that they told us would be miraculous. All of the – could cause blood clots, dizziness, stroke or sudden death – disclaimers come at the very end and are spoken at the speed of a gifted auctioneer- so fast that we cannot understand them.

Well – Scripture takes the opposite approach. Matthew, Mark and Luke all say – right at the beginning of their Gospel – “Meet Jesus!” This is who Jesus is. This is how Jesus operates. This is what Jesus is about. And – as I was reading this passage, it occurred to me that perhaps the most important thing we can do today is to remember who Jesus actually is and how Jesus lived. Because many of us have substituted a weak, culturally inoffensive copy of the Savior of the World in place of the Jesus that Matthew here introduces. So, for those of us who say that we are disciples of Jesus, I can think of no more urgent task this Lenten Season than for all of us to again – Meet Jesus!

Not long after we chose “Walking in the Way of Jesus” as our theme for Lent, I re-discovered a book by Eugene Peterson called, The Jesus Way: A conversation on the ways that Jesus is the Way. If you don't already have a Sunday School Class that you attend, I strongly recommend

that you consider attending the joint class that will meet on Sunday mornings in E205 that will be studying this book. And if you already have a Sunday School class, then I recommend you read this book on your own.

Peterson argues that while Christians continue to repeat Jesus' own claim – I am the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6) – we have conveniently decided that we can proclaim the truth of Jesus, but then live “any old way we like.”ⁱ Peterson rightly observes that “The Jesus way wedded to the Jesus truth brings about the Jesus life.”ⁱⁱ And he calls us out for spending all of our energy on Jesus as truth while simultaneously avoiding living in the Jesus Way. And Peterson writes that the American Christian Church is “conspicuous for replacing the Jesus way with the American way.”ⁱⁱⁱ He suggests that the popular acronym WWJD (What would Jesus Do?) is “not quite accurate. . . . The question must be “**How** does Jesus do it? HDJD. We cannot follow Jesus by living any which way we like. Our following must be consistent with his leading. The way Jesus leads and the way that we follow Jesus are symbiotic. . . . North American Christians are conspicuous for going along with whatever the culture decides is charismatic, successful, influential – whatever gets things done, whatever can gather a crowd of followers – hardly noticing that these ways and means are at odds with the clearly marked way that Jesus walked and called us to follow.”^{iv}

So – if we are to “walk in the way of Jesus” – we need to make HDJD (How does Jesus do it?) our focus. And, exhibit A in that quest could be this story of Jesus temptation in the wilderness.

One of the most obviously offensive parts of this story comes right at the beginning. Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights. Jesus understood that in order to be prepared to be useful to God – to serve God's purpose – he needed to be empty so that God could fill him with power.

I am increasingly convicted and convinced that what we need – as American Christians – is to relearn the spiritual disciplines of SUBTRACTION. How many of us can say that for reasons of faith we have fasted for even a day or two? How many of us have schedules so full that we run from event to event and so are exhausted come the weekend that we feel the need to sleep in on Sunday's to recover so that we can do it all again? How many of us cannot give away more, because our wants and needs already outstrip our income? We are so FULL, that we cannot be useful for God's purposes – we are not able to receive God's Grace because all of our inputs are full. We are consumer Christians who live in a consumer culture of more and bigger and better, and it is choking off our ability to know God, to hear God and to follow God.

Many of you know that our congregation recently participated in three Interfaith dialogues along with Rabbi Case of Beth Shalom Synagogue and Imam Shaheed of the As-Salaam Mosque. And, I found it very convicting to find out that during Ramadan, our Muslim brothers and sisters fast for 30 consecutive days – neither eating nor drinking (no water) – from sunup to sundown. I have fasted, but not without water and not for 30 days. I get grumpy without coffee. That willingness to be empty to give God room in our hearts, lives and stomachs – in large part – been lost to us as American Christians.

So in introducing Jesus, Matthew says that after Jesus fasts, he is tempted in three ways. Bible scholars have spilled much ink defining exactly what these temptations mean. I suggest to you that there is not one right answer, but that these temptations are universally true in such a way that no one explanation can exhaust their meaning for us. So, every time we read this passage, it is able to apply truth to our lives in whatever ways we need to have it applied.

The way it makes sense to me is to say that Jesus is tempted in three ways. First, Jesus is tempted to secure his own survival by turning stones into bread. Second, he is tempted to force God to prove how much Jesus is loved and valued by saving him when he throws himself off of a tall tower. And third, Jesus is tempted to take power and control of the world to force God's ways on the kingdoms of the earth.

What I want you to hear is that the Tempter – the Devil – Evil – or Satan (however you talk about the power of evil) – always tempts us with reasonable, defensible and good things. Evil never begins with the disclaimers! Evil always is sweet on the tongue and promises to fix all that ails us. Evil is only bitter when it reaches the stomach!

The temptation to use any means or tools that will efficiently get God's purpose done is the danger that Jesus here avoids and models for those who claim to walk in the way of Jesus. CS Lewis wrote: "pleasure, money, power and safety are all, as far as they go, good things. The badness consists in pursuing them by the wrong method, or in the wrong way, or too much. . . . wickedness . . . turns out to be the pursuit of some good in the wrong way."^v

Pleasure, money, power and safety are not bad. God's purpose for us is good. But, our temptation is to seek that good above all else and in any way we can. Jesus alone models for us what it looks like to trust God – more than we trust anything or anyone else – to provide for our good. How would Jesus seek the good? How would Jesus use power? How would Jesus seek security?

This conversation could not be more relevant or important. As the political heat and intensity get turned up because of upcoming elections, the temptation to take power any way it can be gotten – via gerrymandering, lying, buying influence, refusing to follow rules that protect fair play or declining to mention the disclaimers, warnings or true costs – is business as usual not only in our political spheres but in the world of business. It is a good and right pursuit to seek a strong functioning nation, but when we do that by any available means, we sell our souls. It is a good thing to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, but when we do that by domination, fear, guilt and exclusion we have lost sight of what it looks like to walk in the way of Jesus. It is a good thing for Churches to be healthy, strong and successful, but when churches motivate their members by preaching that that everyone not like us is the enemy who must be destroyed or eliminated, then we have begun to use the wrong means and measures and we are unable to live the Gospel of the Jesus that we meet in Scripture.

Jesus prepares to serve God's purpose by

- Emptying himself and being willing to go without in order to seek God
- Refusing to ensure his own survival just because he can
- Trusting that God does indeed love and value him -without it needing to be proved
- And he refuses all power and control not granted by God – even if that power could be used for good purpose.

How Jesus lives is consistent with the truth that Jesus proclaimed. The Message and The Means match. Can we say the same of our lives? How does Jesus live? And what do we need to give up, trust or refuse in order to walk in that same way?

O Lord, you met temptation and evil and were undeterred in your faithfulness. But we are weak and the way you set before us is hard. As we walk together in these next weeks, fill us with such a desire to know you and to follow you that we refuse all that does not come from your hand. Help our lives to match your Gospel message. O Lord, make it so in our hearts, in our lives, in our families, and in this church. Bend down to us and hear our prayers. Amen.

ⁱ The Jesus Way: A conversation on the ways that Jesus is the Way; Eugene Peterson; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co: c. 2007, p. 4.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 5.

^{iv} Ibid. p. 8.

^v Mere Christianity; CS Lewis; Macmillan publishing Co; c. 1943; p. 49.