

“Tempted to Stray”

Matthew 4:1-11

First Sunday in Lent

Pastor Andy Kinsey

March 1st, 2020

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

- Matthew 4:11

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, may we hear your voice and so follow you, knowing we belong to you as we share in your Spirit: Amen.

Meditation

There is a wonderful scene from the movie “Overcomer” where the coach of a local basketball team, John Harrison, encounters a former cross country runner in the hospital, Thomas Hill. The two share in a conversation, which gets around to the question of identity, or who you are.

The former athlete, Thomas, presses John to answer the question: “What is the first thing that comes to your mind when someone asks you who you are?”

And John says, “Basketball coach.”

Whereupon Thomas keeps on pressing: “And when you strip that away, who are you?”

John says, “I am history teacher.”

Whereupon Thomas keeps asking, “And when that is gone, who are you?”

And John says, “I am a father, a husband, an American, a male, etc.”

Whereupon Thomas asks again, “And when those are gone, who are you?”

And John says, “I am a Christian.”

And Thomas says, “And what does that mean?”

And John says, “It means I am a follower of Christ.”

And Thomas says, “And how important is that?”

To which John replies, “It’s very important.”

“Interesting how far down the list that it was,” Thomas observes.

In all honesty, I would probably be like Coach John too. Yes, I am a pastor, but I am a husband, a father, a son, a brother, an uncle, a teacher. The list goes on and on. But beneath it all, who am I?

Indeed, on any given day, within hours, I can walk into the hospital where I am a pastor, and then go to UIndy where I am a teacher, and then share with the Chamber of Commerce where I am a board member, and then go to Rotary where I am a Rotarian. But beneath all the roles and labels, who am I?

And who are you? A banker, a teacher, a nurse, a parent, a grandparent. But at the end of the day, who are you really? When we strip away all the labels and roles, who are you? And whose are you?

That’s really what questions of identity entail: who are you? To whom do you belong? Do you belong to the state? To a corporation? To a business? What about a family? All the above? Is one more important than the other? Or is it something that is always in process or changing?

Season of Lent

During the season of Lent, questions of identity come to the fore. It is a time to explore more deeply who we are and whose we are.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons the church has always insisted on beginning the Lenten journey in the Wilderness, with Jesus’s forty-days of fasting and testing: at the heart of Jesus’s time in the wilderness is the question of Jesus’ identity and purpose: Who is Jesus really, and what is he going to do? Or, to put it a little differently: what kind of Son of God is Jesus going to be?

That’s really the question: it is not *whether* Jesus is God’s Son, the question is *what kind* of God’s Son Jesus is going to be.¹ Even the devil knows Jesus is

¹ Paula Gooder, *Let Me Go There: The Spirit of Lent* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2020), 69.

God's Son. But the devil also wants to know if Jesus would take the easy route or the hard route to being the Messiah, the Son of God.

Jesus' Wilderness Exam

Jesus' identity is really at the core of this passage, as he goes into the wilderness to take an "exam," if you will, like no other exam, to find out what kind of mission he is going to fulfill and what missions he will not.

I use the word "exam" here because that's really what is happening when Jesus encounters the devil: fresh from the waters of baptism, Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tested (4:1). In fact, that's really the word Matthew uses for temptation: testing or *peirozo*. The NRSV translates this word as "tempt," but closer study reveals that Matthew uses this same word several other times in his Gospel.²

In Matthew 16:1, for example, there is the story of how the Pharisees and the Sadducees try to "test" Jesus by asking him for a sign from heaven. And in Matthew 19:3, the Pharisees test Jesus again about his view on divorce. In both cases, Jesus' questioners would love to trip him up, or take him off course. They would love to see him fail.³

All of which is to suggest that a more helpful way to understand what is taking place between Jesus and the devil is to see how Jesus is being "tested," though the line between testing and tempting overlaps, to be sure.

For example, with Jesus' first exam question, the devil wants to see if Jesus would be the kind of Son of God who would do miracles for his own advantage: would Jesus feed himself when he was hungry, or would he feed others as part of God's kingdom – turning stone into bread (4:1-3). What will Jesus do? Will he be a great social activist, or will he be someone whose own Bread of life feeds both soul and body?

Jesus' second exam question: the devil wants to know that if Jesus is God's Son, would Jesus take spectacular action and throw himself off the temple and force God's hand, as some kind of religious superstar, or would Jesus show another

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

way to understand God's presence by reaching out to the least and the last and the lost? A superhero or someone who offers God's presence to those who suffer? What kind of Son of God is Jesus going to be?

And a third question: the devil wants to find out if Jesus would be the kind of Son of God who would do anything at all, like bowing down to the devil himself, in order to gain political power, or would Jesus reveal another, alternative way to the world's power systems? What kind of leader is Jesus going to be?

All three "tests" speak to Jesus' identity: Who is Jesus going to be? What is he going to do?⁴

Background to Jesus' Wilderness Exam

Viewed in this way, we can hopefully see how Jesus' own example might serve as a pattern to the way we might think about testing or temptation in our own lives. For surely, if we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us and if we obey the Spirit's call, we will face temptation or moments of trial. No Christian gets a pass. In fact, somewhere along the journey we all will face choices as to what is important. How will we respond? What kind of disciples are we going to be? What will we do?

Over the next forty days, if we can come to an answer to these questions, we will have had a good Lent. Are we going to be the kind of disciples who place our own desires before the needs of others, or will we place the worship and service of God at the center of everything we do?

Think of other biblical passages: think of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden or the people of Israel in the wilderness: in both cases there was a forgetting as to who they were.

In story of Adam and Eve, the serpent gets them to think they can be as God, and not creatures of God; and in the Exodus, the people begin to complain about their new found freedom, no longer trusting God. In other words, there are going to be moments in our lives when *one like a serpent* will test us by getting us to think of ourselves more as God than God (Genesis 2), and there are going to be moments when, once given our freedom from bondage, we will want to go back to Egypt where at least we know the comfort of our surroundings (Exodus 17). Or, to use

⁴ Ibid.

another biblical image, there are going to be moments when, like a sheep, we will go astray (Luke 15:1-10).

What the season of Lent is about is how God seeks to bring us back, to give us our freedom, to return to and follow God, even in the face of testing and tempting. That's Lent in a nutshell.

Invitation to Discipleship

So consider the invitation to discipleship here at the end of the sermon as a way to follow Jesus' pattern of saying "No" to the devil and "Yes" to God, or of saying "No" to the easy way and "Yes" to the road less traveled. Not that the Spirit is not with us either way, but that in our trials and testing, we learn who we are, as well as learn that we cannot be anything we want to be.⁵

As one of our Lenten devotions said so well this week, "We can only be where we are, not where we wish to be."⁶ That is, we are where we are, and we are who we are, and only by God's help can we be who God wants us to be. And that doesn't just go for us as individual persons, but as a congregation: who are you, Grace Church? Who are we?

Because there are all kinds of churches out there, aren't there? So many churches to choose from: Mega-churches, little churches, dying churches, stagnant ones, vital ones. Ones with bands and light shows, others with Eucharist and Holy Mass. Some in store fronts, others in homes. All kinds of churches.

But who are we? What makes us distinctive as a church? Regardless of what the sign out front says, who are we?

That's a good question on this first weekend in Lent, and it is why I would like you to take a "Yellow Card" in the pew and write down, as the Thomas Hill asked: who are we? What comes to your mind first? And when you come forward, you can place your answer in the basket or at the altar. Who are we?

For this congregation has been in Franklin for 195 years: it has been a constant in a world of change. People have come, and people have gone. But we are here because people before us have trusted and obeyed. Trusted and heard

⁵ Arthur F. Miller Jr., *You Can't Be Anything You Want to Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999).

⁶ Sam McGlothlin, *The Sanctuary in Lent 2020*, "February 27th" (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), 3.

God's voice. Trusted and known who they were. No matter the trials or tests or temptations. No matter what was happening in the world: they listened and responded to God as God's own people – coming to grips with the questions that won't go away: who are you, and to whom do you belong? Amen.