

A Test of Trust
Matthew 4:1-11

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Our gospel reading for today finds Jesus, who has just been baptized and who has just heard those wonderful words from heaven identifying him as God's own Son, thrust into the wilderness by the Spirit of God to be tempted by the devil. In English, the word tempt has a rather negative connotation. It means to entice someone to do wrong, to lure them into sin. But the Greek word peirazein, translated tempt in this passage, means to test far more than to tempt in our sense of the word. It means to test like one would test metal to determine the stress and strain it can handle, like one would test a new car or a new recipe. Temptation in this sense is not meant to make us sin; it is meant, Barclay writes, to enable us to conquer sin.

C.S. Lewis writes that only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is and how strong they are. After all, you find out the strength of an army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. If you are the New York Giants, you don't know how strong the New England Patriots are until you play them with your starters at the end of the regular season, before you have to face them in Super Bowl. Temptation is not meant to weaken us, but to make us stronger and finer and purer. And so it is with Jesus. As he starts his ministry, he is put to the test: a test of trust.

It is Satan that is doing the testing in our story for today. Satan, as one might surmise, is crafty and manipulative and since the testing of the first humans to this point in Jesus' life, he has not lost a contest yet. Satan's goal is to get the one being tested to trust in something, anything, other than God. In his conversation with Jesus, Satan uses three different lies, three different false underlying assumptions that worked on Adam and Eve, and that he hopes will work on Jesus and on us.

The first lie is this: Humans can satisfy themselves physically apart from God. One does not have to look very far to notice that humans believe this lie. All the chapters of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, all the businesses involved in the diet industry, all of the centers for cosmetic surgery, all of the sexual impropriety going on around us, prove that humans have bought into this lie. We accumulate so many possessions; we have to buy bigger houses to hold them. Then we fill up the bigger house with more possessions and therefore need a bigger house and so on. How many times have I looked in my closet and exclaimed, "I have nothing to wear!"? Of course I do have something to wear, but a new outfit

somehow makes me feel better. We somehow have believed that a physical high from drugs or food or material possessions can fill a void, can take the place that only God can fill. Adam and Eve were surrounded by the most delicious fruit, all for their own taking and enjoyment, yet were talked into disobeying God for a bite of one piece of fruit that our text says, was a delight to the eyes.

Jesus, on the other hand, is starving. And making bread is not a bad thing in and of itself. In fact, Jesus will soon multiply bread in a miraculous way to feed the more than 5000 people listening to him teach. But Jesus does not believe the lie. He does not believe that he can be satisfied physically if he goes against God's plan and purpose. Jesus will not use his power to satisfy his own hunger. Jesus will not use his power at the command of God's enemy. Jesus will use his power only when directed by the Father to do so. **Jesus trusts God above his physical needs.**

The second lie is this: If God is not doing something spectacular in the world's estimation, then God is not at work. We Christians believe this lie so often. One of my Baptist clergy friends has told me that if at least 10 people don't come forward at the end of a service, then either the sermon was bad or the worship was a failure. Don't we love to hear testimonies of former gang member/drug addict/felon Christians over the more boring "I've been a Christian all my life" testimonies? Aren't we more impressed with Christian authors that sell millions of books and remain on bestseller lists, no matter what the content and motive of that book might be? Don't we really think churches with 20,000 members are more faithful than churches with 20 members? Don't we get impatient with ourselves and with others when there is not overnight change in our lives? Don't we even doubt our experience of God as real when change is slow?

Adam and Eve saw nothing spectacular out of God, unless you call creation spectacular. Walking face to face with God in a beautiful garden is well, not very cutting edge. So, they were talked into doubting the goodness of the One who made them. "God said you couldn't do what?" the serpent asks. "God just wants to keep you in your place, to keep you from being like him. God doesn't want you to know." So they saw that the fruit would make them wise, and they failed the test.

The lie to Jesus, posed in the form of a challenge, is this: "If you are really who you think you are, then people should know. Do something spectacular in Jerusalem to prove that you are the Son of God. Throw yourself off the temple. That will get some attention. That will put you on the bestseller list for sure." Jesus did not believe the lie that God must act in humanly spectacular ways to be real and present and working. Jesus does

not need to prove himself. Jesus is willing to settle for no public verification, no demonstrable evidence that God's plan is in place. Jesus has a patient trust that refuses to force God's hand. Jesus will do some spectacular things in his lifetime such as healing the sick and raising the dead. But Jesus does these things out of compassion for those affected and only at the Father's leading. Jesus does no miracle for fame or fortune or even to save himself, as we see when Herod demands a miracle at the end of Jesus' life. Jesus will enter Jerusalem triumphantly, but humbly on a donkey. Jesus knows that to attract followers with the sensational is to have to produce even greater and greater sensations to keep them. **Jesus trusts God over the need for spectacular displays of power and passes the test.**

The third lie is this: Humans can worship that which is not God without consequence. Whether it is Satan, or power, or money, or prestige, or ourselves, humans very easily worship things other than God. It is always surprising how many people, even church people, do not consider the worship of God very important. If anything else comes along, some will easily and gladly skip worship. Sports, work, leisure activities, family time, travel, even the idea of sleeping in, allows us to skip worship. Whatever we skip worship for is what we worship instead.

Now worship does not have to happen on Sunday morning. It can happen anywhere and anytime. And there are legitimate reasons for missing worship such as illness, or physical impairment, or serving in a profession that requires 24-hour a day scheduling. But I have rarely met anyone who willingly chose to miss worship in church on Sunday morning who truly worshiped at another time.

To worship means to ascribe worth to something. We choose to miss worship for other things because we believe they are to our advantage over worshiping God, because they will bring us money, power, or personal enjoyment, because we believe other pursuits will give our life more meaning. We are wrong, for it is our relationship with God that gives humans meaning, and when that is right, everything else will fall into place. Adam and Eve took the fruit because they thought it would be good for them, even though it meant disobeying God. Adam and Eve were promised they would be like God.

Jesus did not believe the lie. Jesus knew that his relationship to God is what gave him meaning. He would not worship Satan, power, or riches because he knew who he was in relationship to God. His undivided commitment to God gave him the freedom to reject enticing alternatives. Jesus refused a selfish grab at worldly power. Jesus knew that to compromise with the enemy was to worship something other than God. To

be the Son of God does mean that all authority in heaven and earth will be given to him, and that he will be King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus will be lifted up as the name above all names. But first, Jesus will be lifted up on a cross. **Jesus trusted God's calling upon his life over money and power and passed the test.**

Lent is a time to sort out the voice of God from the counter-voices that lie to us. This text is an invitation back to trusting God alone. This Matthew text provides us with the example of Jesus; who is severely tested in the harshest of circumstances; who is invited to take an easier path; who is invited to adopt a worldview that reveres power and money; who is invited to spectacular displays above humble service; and who passes the test of trust.

Just like Jesus, we have the power to say NO to Satan or to any temptation that might come our way. When Jesus orders Satan's departure, Satan must go. We somehow have bought into the idea that the tempter or the temptations themselves have power over us. In the movie *The Devil's Advocate*, Keanu Reeves plays a lawyer who takes a job in a big New York firm, only to find that he compromises his ethics, and eventually lies to the court and to his clients. He ends up destroying his life and his marriage in the pursuit of promotion at this firm. At the end of the movie, when he has lost everything, he confronts the senior partner at the firm, Al Pacino, who he finds out is Satan. Reeves is distraught, blaming Satan for every misstep, every breach in ethics, for the crumbling of his marriage and career, claiming that Satan made him do these things. Satan's response to him is a very Biblical one. He tells Reeves: You always had the choice to say NO.

Jesus knows Satan has no power. Jesus says "NO" to all his lies. Jesus passes the test and trusts in God alone. It is this same Jesus who is today present in our worship, who promises never to leave or forsake us, who will give us his strength to pass any test. Take this season of reflection and discipleship to learn to rely on the grace of God in all things, and pass the test of trust. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.