

TEMPTED BY THE FUTURE

Genesis 3:1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the First Sunday in Lent, February 26, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 3:1-7

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman,

‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”?’

The woman said to the serpent,

‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”’

But the serpent said to the woman,

‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

The tempter came and said to him,

‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’

But he answered,

*‘It is written,
“One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’*

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him,

‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you”,

and

*“On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’*

Jesus said to him,

‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him,

‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’

Jesus said to him,

*‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.” ’*

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Just as the Transfiguration story we read last Sunday appears each year on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, so also the Temptation story, we read today, occurs on the First Sunday of Lent.

I.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke – the three synoptic gospels that present Jesus’ life – his Temptation in the wilderness follows immediately upon his baptism. This is the first time we have seen Jesus in the New Testament since he was lost and found in the Temple at age twelve. After twenty years of *silence within* and *absence from* the text, Jesus has re-emerged, being drawn to the fiery preacher John the Baptist, submitting himself to baptism in the River Jordan, and has now emerging from the waters, ready to begin the work of his life.

As soon as Jesus emerges from the waters, the first thing that happens is the Spirit of God leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by “the devil.”

Now I am aware that as soon as I introduce a character in a sermon by this name, some of you may be *tempted* to check out of the sermon. Names like “the devil,” “Satan,” “the evil one,” “Beelzebub,” “the tempter,” or any other name by which this character goes in Scripture, may lead you to feel we are suddenly in the realm of science fiction, ancient mythology, or medieval mysticism. If the lights dim, you might think we are about to practice an exorcism. But before you check out, let me give some background to “the devil.”

The great majority of Jewish and Christian thinkers across the centuries – me included – possess a worldview that has four basic beliefs:¹

- *First*, the sovereign God *created* the world.
- *Second*, God's sovereignty over the world has been *usurped* by some force allied against God.
 - This usurpation is given narrative in the account of the Fall in which the first man and first woman seek to *exceed* the creaturely bounds God has established for them in the Garden in which he has placed them. They eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and therefore seek knowledge *reserved only for God* and violate the *only* restriction God has placed on them. For that act of usurpation, they experience shame, a mutual blaming of one another, a fracture with nature, pain in both work and childbirth, and expulsion from the garden. The agent of their usurpation is the "the Serpent," a crafty creature who uses words God has spoken to destructive ends.
 - Fast-forward to the New Testament: In our story of the Temptation, the *name* of the usurper is "the devil," "the tempter," "the adversary," "*Ha Satan*," "Satan." These are names throughout scripture given to the force that stands in opposition to God. Jews and Christians have a basic understanding that such a force, no matter its name, remains *active* and *powerful*.
- *Third*, God has responded to this usurpation by giving his kingdom over to a people God has chosen, through Abraham and Sarah, as his own. They have entered into a covenant with God in which they have accepted responsibility for God's kingdom and seek to do God's will in the world in ways that benefit that kingdom. After the birth of Christ, we Christians believe we have been grafted into this covenant people, with the same responsibility for representing God's kingdom in the world.
- *Fourth*, God's victory over this usurping power has become focused, for Christians, in the birth and life, death and resurrection of Christ. The final victory will occur with Christ's return in glory, which for Jews, equates to "the day of the Lord," a phrase that occurs multiple times in the Old Testament.² Until that day, both Christians and Jews believe that we live during a when the "*not yet*" is awaiting to become he "*already*," when initial victory is waiting to become final victory on the part of God and God's Messiah.

So the basic framework of this understanding is:

- Creation
- Fall
- Redemption
- Final return.

The Temptation of Christ occurs at the *beginning of the redemptive phase*, the *beginning* of the ministry of Christ's preaching, teaching, healing, and acts of mercy. It marks the beginning of the end of the rule and power of evil. It bears witness to the reality that while evil has been *conquered* in Christ, it is still *present* and

¹ The bulk of the research in this sermon comes from M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 8* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 161-166, and Excursus 241-252, 288-294, 353-361.

² Isaiah 2:12, Amos 5:18-20, Joel 2:32, Malachi 4:2, Daniel 12:12.

active, as a *defeated* power, a *conquered* enemy, a *force* on its way out, sometimes *retreating*, sometimes regrouping. But no matter how many battles evil still *wins*, it lacks the ultimate power to prevail over the power of God.

II.

What this means for us are *three* brief things:

- *First*, as I said last week, in the role we play as followers of Christ, we need not return to the *past* to live out our faith. “The past is finished and gone.”³ The present is at hand. We are to be *on hand* in the present moment, day, or era, for the kingdom of God which is *at hand* but *not in hand*.⁴
- *Second*, we do not need to know, nor do we have access to, all that is in the *mind of God* about the present and future. We can and do live out our faith “in a mirror darkly.”⁵
- *Third*, in each way Jesus was tempted by the Devil, he was tempted to provide a form of *certainty*:
 - The certainty of *food* – stones into bread for everyone – so that people would be guaranteed to be fed, a precious promise in a desert land.
 - The certainty of *miraculous rescue* – Jesus casting himself off the tower of the Temple and being rescued by angels so that people would be dazzled into belief.
 - And the certainty of living under an *authoritarian* government – where faith would come by *decree* and people would be free from facing any responsibility involving choice other than saluting the emperor.

Had Jesus *gone along* with the Devil, had he turned bread into stones, thrown himself off the Temple, assumed control of the state and empire, he would have been bringing the future for everyone who encountered him *without any intervening steps* on their parts to *listen* to his teaching, *witness* his miracles and acts of mercy, *sit* with him at table with tax collectors and sinners, or to *stand* with him as he faces betrayal, arrest, abandonment, trial, crucifixion, mocking, and death.

Had Jesus gone along with the Devil, people would come to *blind faith* without any sense of *personal responsibility* or *free choice*. Theirs would be faith by bread and circus, by food and drink, by dazzlement and decree. The spiritual nightmare behind Dostoevsky’s *Grand Inquisitor* would come true: It would faith by fear, not faith by freedom, faith by coercion, not faith by moral agency.⁶

Believe me, we can find churches and their preachers and teachers across the world today who seek to inculcate faith through dazzle or decree. But none of these ways involve the responsibility of believers for *choice* and *assent*. None of these ways involving “working out our own salvation in fear and trembling.”⁷ None of these involves answering the call of Christ “o’er the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea.”⁸ Faith by *dazzlement* or *decree* is not faith by *discipleship*.

³ I Corinthians 5:17a.

⁴ This is a formulation from my friend and theology professor Christopher Morse.

⁵ I Corinthians 13:12.

⁶ This is essentially the theme of Dostoevsky’s “The Grand Inquisitor,” in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

⁷ Psalm 2:11; Philippians 2:11.

⁸ “Fairest Lord Jesus,” available at <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/175>.

III.

My friends, much as we would like it to be otherwise, controlling as we habitually are, and planners that we seem born to be: *We do not know the future.*

We do not know:

- The condition of our climate and its ultimate impact on us, even as we go from 81 degrees on Thursday to snow yesterday and blizzard in Los Angeles.
- The pace of growth in technology, its ultimate impact on our hearts and mind, its impact on so much of what we do, including how we learn to interact with other human beings across similar screen and media, how we learn to live in a community of embodied people, how we learn to love.
- The outcome of the war in Ukraine and its impact on the role Russia will play in the world and how that affects us.
- The role China, North Korea, Iran, will continue to play.
- We do not know when or where the next epidemic will hit, nor when nature will next erupt into terror and tragedy.

All this we do not know.

- What education will be from the youngest to the most specialized scholars in years ahead, what different schools in different states with different governing structures and authorities will teach about race and gender and orientation and at what ages.
- Whether technology and economic development will continue the trajectory of less starvation, greater literacy, lower infant mortality, and less poverty that was in effect prior to COVID.
- We do not know where we will land as a nation concerning the ultimate acceptability, legality, or availability of abortion, and how much variance there may be state to state.
- How much people of differing races and ethnic backgrounds will grow *together* or *grow apart* in our country.
- What will happen to the millions of immigrants currently in our land, now nor how many will seek to come here and share in our freedom, opportunity, and values.
- Who will be the next president or the next candidates for the highest of our offices.
- What shape our national government will be in (executive, legislative, judicial) and how much we will or won't remain a liberal society in the classic sense, nor how democratic we will be at federal, state, and local levels.
- We do not know if the current decline in religious belief and affiliation in our country will bottom out, or if the religious revival at a small college in Kentucky is a harbinger of another Great Awakening in

America, a revival that has prompted Ross Douthat to pen an article in today's *New York Times* "You Can't Predict the Future of Religion."

- And perhaps most importantly: We do not know what *joy* will come into our lives the next 48 hours or what *tragedy* the next 48 days.

But this we know: When Jesus confronted the devil with Scripture, the words Jesus used came from the book of Deuteronomy:

*"One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God"*⁹

*"Do not put the Lord your God to the test"*¹⁰

*"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him."*¹¹

It is the same book, with the same spirit, that Moses had used when saying farewell to the people of Israel. Moses words can assure us now, even and especially when we are tempted by the future, when our anxiety about what we do not know threatens to get the best of our faith and our lives:

*Surely
This commandment
That I am commanding you today
Is not too hard for you,
Nor is it too far away.*

*It is not in heaven,
That you should say,
'Who will go up to heaven for us,
And get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?'*

*Neither is it beyond the sea,
That you should say,
'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us,
And get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?'*

*No, the word is very near to you;
It is in your mouth and in your heart
For you to observe.*¹²

The Word near to us is all we are *promised* to know, but it is ultimately all we *need* to know. With it, we can assume our position as disciples of Jesus Christ, enlist ourselves as members of that body of God's people –

⁹ Deuteronomy 8:3.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 6:16.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 6:13.

¹² Deuteronomy 30:11-14.

placed in the world through Abraham and Sarah in the chaotic days of after the Tower of Babel – to lean into the world's redemption which is the ultimate shape and promise of the future.

With our feet planted firmly on the ground,
With our hands folded in prayer
Then opened for hospitality and heavy lifting,
Our heads bowed in worship, study, or both:

We meet each day with joy, love, humor, and hope, in the world that has been created by God, fallen into significant disrepair, but it being renewed before our very eyes.

Amen.