

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Year A, First Sunday in Lent, 5 March 2017
Matthew 4.1-11
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

So, here we are on the First Sunday in Lent and it probably comes as no surprise that we're starting off with—wait for it—sin. Or, if not sin *per se*, then at least the *temptation* to sin—specifically, Adam and Eve's *failure* to resist temptation, from the second creation story in Genesis, and Jesus' *successful* resistance to it in Matthew. This morning, I want to focus mainly on Jesus' story. You might be surprised to hear me say it, but I believe this short episode of Jesus' temptation in the desert is one of the most important stories we have about him. I won't have time in a sermon to go into the depth the story demands, but I'll try to leave you curious enough that you'll want to research it for yourselves. But first some deep background.

Every major religion in the world is trying to solve what it takes to be the fundamental problem of human existence. For Hinduism and Buddhism, it's ignorance. For Taoism and Confucianism it's disharmony. For Judaism, Christianity, and Islam it's sin. There are, of course, many nuances within each of these major traditions that distinguish them from each other—for example, Christians typically put much more emphasis on original sin than Jews do and Jews usually put more emphasis on slavery, exile, and alienation than Christians do. That being said, it can also be argued, as you've heard me do in the past, that the problem of evil and human suffering lies behind even these fundamental challenges and that this problem is common to all the major religions. We will see how this is the case in the story of Jesus' temptation—his testing the desert reveals some very profound insights into God and God's purposes for humankind

in light of evil and suffering in the world. I am not alone in making this claim, and I will here use the insights of my mentor, Diogenes Allen to help us understand this story (see his *Temptation*, 1986 and *Theology for a Troubled Believer*, 2010). Now, to the temptations themselves.

It was just after his baptism that Jesus was led, by the Spirit, into the desert to be tempted by the devil. This was at the very beginning of his public ministry, and his forty days of prayer and fasting may be viewed as a preparation for the spiritual battle he will face in completing his mission. I don't want us to get bogged down in whether Jesus *literally* fasted for forty days—that language is symbolic in the Bible for “a long time,” but it also signals in Matthew, as we've already seen, that Jesus is being portrayed as a new Moses, going into the desert just before he delivered a new law and established a new covenant in the Sermon on the Mount, which follows the story of his temptation. I also don't want us to get bogged down in the reference to the devil, or Satan. In scriptures, Satan was originally not a name but a title—the Satan—and over time he evolved from a sort of prosecuting attorney (no lawyer jokes, please!) to a personified force of evil, working with an army of demons to subvert God's good work in creation. I don't know for sure if Jesus believed in the devil and in demons—it seems likely that he did, based on what we know of his healing ministry—but the devil's presence here signals where Jesus believed the real enemy is to be found—in evil itself. Whatever his views on Satan, Jesus certainly believed in the power of evil.

Now, once Jesus is in the desert for forty days and feeling very vulnerable—we are told that he's famished, which is one of the greatest understatement of the entire Bible—he is approached by the devil, who is here also called the “tempter.”

Jesus faces three temptations, and each of them is designed to test his status as the Son of God or, perhaps better, his understanding of how the Son of God is going to do his work. In the first temptation, when he is extremely hungry, he is tempted to command the stones to turn into bread. In the second, from the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus is tempted to use his power to demonstrate that he is the Messiah to those below—there was legend at the time that said the Messiah would appear at the pinnacle of the Temple. And, in the third temptation, he is promised all the kingdoms of the world if only he would give his devotion and worship to Satan. Each of these temptations deserves a sermon in itself, but here I want to summarize what at least some commentators believe is going on.

The contrast with Adam and Eve in our reading from Genesis is significant. Our original parents failed their test where Jesus succeeds. As the Son of God who is also human, Jesus success enables him to lead humans back into fellowship with God—Allen calls Jesus a “pioneer” who “blazes a trail” for us back to God—and, more importantly, it prepares him to face his last and greatest temptation in the crucifixion, which we’ll have occasion to examine in coming weeks. What is common in the three temptations concerns God’s awful choice in the creation of humans.

Allen claims that God faced a genuine dilemma in creating humans. If God wanted to create beings who could freely love God and each other, two things must happen. First, God must withdraw or limit God’s self in an important sense so that other beings and worlds can exist and, two, those beings must be created with sufficient freedom that they could choose otherwise, that is, they could choose not to love God, for true love cannot be coerced, it can only be given.

However, if God gave these beings such freedom, that meant God must also expose those beings to the possibility that their choices would result in their own suffering and the suffering of those around them. In all of the temptations Jesus faced, he is being tempted—with very good reason, it turns out, because the hardest temptations are always about doing something good—Jesus is being tempted to overturn or disallow or fail to accept this original choice that God made in creation.

In turning stones into bread, Jesus is not just tempted to feed himself but, more so, to feed all hungry people everywhere. But if Jesus used his special status as God’s Son to remove the threat of hunger, he would also lose his ability to be like us, that is, genuinely vulnerable, and thus his ability to lead us back to God. Just because he is God’s Son, Jesus will *not* exercise such powers, even though they were available to him. In the second temptation, Jesus is tempted to overcome the conditions that lead to injury. We naturally want to limit our exposure to various harms, but we know we cannot avoid sickness, injury, and finally death—it is the human condition. Jesus, in deciding not to test his powers by leaping from the Temple, is trusting that God loves him even when he might be injured or harmed in some way—again, he is accepting the conditions God created in the creation of human with free will. In the third temptation, Jesus is faced squarely with the same choice that God faced in creation. Yes, he could coerce all nations to bow down before him—that is, he could impose himself on all people in order to stop our wars and suffering—but that would also mean that people could not freely choose to love him or God, his Father. Said differently, they might come to “love” God in some very distorted or self-interested way, that is, for what they could get *from* God.

And it is here we come to crux of the matter. In every fantasy book I've ever read, the hero uses his or her special powers to right wrongs and save people from their own choices. And usually people are grateful for this, at least initially, if we don't count those who get trampled or killed in the process. The point is that we too often assume that, if God loves us, God will do special things for us—God will feed us, God will protect us, or God will rescue us. After all, that's what gods are for, right? Jesus, in these temptations, is trying to show us that the gift that God actually wants to give us is, finally, God's very self. In the end, God wants us to *choose* to love God, not for what God can give us or do for us, but for what God *is* or, perhaps better, for *who* God is.

This is a profound spiritual lesson, and one that is very hard to learn and to accept, but I think this actually is the point of these three temptations. Allen claims that God want us to learn from Jesus that God's love is "incommensurate" with any other love or good we can imagine, that is, that it can't be compared to any other love or good. I don't want to be judgmental or harsh, but we find this hard to understand or accept it may be because we haven't yet experienced the kind of love God wants to give us. Jesus' successful resistance to becoming like every other fantasy hero shows that he is uniquely qualified to help us find this love. His success was not easily won, as we'll see when he realizes he's been forsaken by God just before his death. For now, I want us to try to imagine what it would be like to experience God's self, to experience God's love, in such a way that every other good thing we can imagine would pale by comparison—and, that every bad thing that's ever happened to us would be viewed as but a step to take us closer to accepting God's love. If we can begin to imagine such a thing, we will find we are close, very close, to the central core of our Christian faith. Amen.