

The Journey Begins!

FIRST/SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
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Matthew 4:1-11

Our Lenten journeys began on Ash Wednesday with the placing of an ashen cross on our foreheads. So we are currently well on our Lenten journeys. In today's lesson Jesus begins a journey in the wilderness. But before we get into the lesson, I'd like to share is that one thing I did at the beginning of my Lenten journey. It may help as you travel along yours. I attended a lecture given by Peter Marty, who is a retired Lutheran pastor and the editor of *The Christian Century* magazine. He called it "*Behaving Christianly*." He addressed some of the ways Christians might cultivate a moral conscience and how to be responsible citizens in tumultuous times.

Pastor Marty points out that the leading crisis in American religion today is that politics dominates faith in dramatic ways. A couple of generations ago, people joined a faith community and acquired a value system, a set of understandings, and a deepening of oneself and consciousness. Then they would take them to the ballot box. It was their value system and faith that informed their political mindset. Today, our partisan identity and political ideology inform our faith. It is quite a reversal.

Pastor Marty highlights eight ways we can act Christianly in today's world. Some of these anchors are reflected in Jesus' encounter with the devil in the wilderness. First, discerning your spiritual center. The kind of person we are at the very center of our being determines everything else about us. It is important to know who we are; and to whom we belong. Second,

shaping a moral conscience. In other words, standing up for what is right and good. It includes having moral courage, integrity, strength of character and a willingness to tell the truth. Third, becoming somebody more than you currently are. We are not finished products. We are always in the process of becoming. Our formation grows constantly when we are in community with other Christians. Mercy, generosity, and compassion are learned and practiced. The fruits of Spirit develop over time; and Jesus' words form us. Fourth, we need our neighbors. Today we don't depend on others as we once did. With the growth of technology, many of us tend to live insular lives. We don't think we need our neighbors. Yet we need our neighbors to gain meaning for our lives. To engage with people of differing viewpoints exposes us to a diversity of opinions and produces new insights. The only place we truly find Christ is in community with others. A congregation is the least specialized gathering of human beings on the planet. Here we rub shoulders, however grudgingly, as brothers and sisters. And the only thing we have in common is our common humanity and God. Fifth, cultivating tenderness and toughness. In other words, having a tough mind and a tender heart. Those with tough minds learn to be incisive and realistic. Those with tender hearts discover how to embrace the world with grace and mercy. The ideal is to have both: a tough mind and tender heart simultaneously. Six, being aware of how we use authority and the ways we speak to power. Power has a coercive element to it. Authority does not. Jesus didn't exercise authority through a love of power. He exercised authority through the power of love. Seven, constancy. This means having a sense of congruity between our inner life and outer life. Faithfulness, dedication and trustworthiness. The cross brings perspective to our lives. And finally, eight is having a winsome kind of love. It is a particular kind of goodness that we can embrace in our lives. It is a love that is good and lovely, engaging and charming.

Jesus exemplifies each of these anchors in his encounter with the tempter. Thus, he is our model to follow. Jesus led into the wilderness by Spirit, finds himself in a place of risk and revelation, uncertainty and possibility. But Jesus has a sense of who he is. This scene follows his baptism by the Spirit in which God declares that he is his Son, his agent, and representative on earth. And yet, before his ministry begins, Jesus' identity is tested three times by the tempter to affirm his identity. He spends forty days praying and fasting before meeting up with the tempter, who tries to get Jesus to stray from his mission. But Jesus knows his spiritual center and who he is.

Our Lenten journeys are not about proving our strength, boasting, or asserting our power. It is about remembering who we are and to whom we belong. It is about discerning what centers us. Are we centered in the ways and distractions of the world? Or are we centered in Christ. When the Devil encounters Jesus, his motive is to knock him off track! But what is actually being tempted here? The key is the phrase that begins each of the temptations is: "If *you are the Son of God...*" The tempter doesn't challenge the existence of God. He challenges Jesus to discover what it means to be God's Son. As God's Son will Jesus use his power to satisfy himself? As God's Son, will he try to prove it dramatically? As God's Son will he use his power to take control of the kingdoms of the world? Matthew isn't using Satan metaphorically, but rather adversarially. Satan embodies a way of being in the world that stands in direct opposition to the kingdom Jesus proclaims. He is the voice of isolation, self-preservation, spectacle, and domination.

The first test is stones into bread. Jesus is famished. The tempter says, "*Command these stones to become loaves of bread.*" From a human perspective, it seems kind of harmless. Jesus is hungry, so why not eat? But Jesus has moral courage, integrity, strength of character and a willingness to tell the truth. He knows his need for others. Turning stones into bread severs him from a web of human interdependence. Bread is communal. It requires seed, soil, rain, labor, harvest, grinding, kneading, baking. It involves farmers, millers, bakers and shared tables. To manufacture bread from stones would alleviate hunger, but without dependence on the land, labor, neighbor, or the daily provision of God. It would make Jesus self-sufficient. Satan's first offer is not indulgence. It is isolation. He is saying, "Jesus, you don't need anyone. You don't need community. You can take care of yourself, but he knows his need for neighbors. In the book, *The Vanishing Neighbor* by Marc Dunkelman, he maintains that, "*Adults today tend to prize different kinds of connections than their grand-parents: more of our time and attention today is spent on [the first ring] more intimate contacts (family, favorites on our contact list) and the most casual acquaintances [the third ring] (people with whom we share common interests.)* But Dunkelman asserts, "*We've abandoned the relationships in between what I define ... 'middle-ring' ties.*" In other words, the Elks, Lion's Club, and church congregations. He goes on to say, "*And that shift, made as the result of millions of individual decisions across the whole of society, has quietly spurred the second transformation of American community and left us with the impression that the future is bleak.*" Middle-ring ties are communal. So, What does Jesus say to the tempter? He says, "*One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*" Life is not sustained merely by consumption, but by trust and relationships with others.

In the second test, the tempter leads Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple. It is the religious center of Israel's life. Here, Satan quotes Psalm 91. He uses faith language to justify risk. "*He will command his angels concerning you...*" If the first temptation was about self-sufficiency, this one is about spectacle. He is saying to Jesus, "*Prove it. Perform a miracle so undeniable that no one could question you. Throw yourself down. Let God catch you.*" But Jesus has a sense of congruity between his inner life and outer life. He is faithful, dedicated, and trustworthy to his heavenly Father. He has no desire to make a spectacle of his faith and trust in God.

Our faith is to be shared by our experiences. It isn't something we display. God isn't to be used as a tool for our performance. Faith is about trust. But Jesus refuses to turn trust into a test. *"Do not put the Lord your God to the test."* Jesus refuses to manipulate the Father for public approval. Jesus will not coerce belief through stunts. His authority is rooted in trust.

The final temptation takes place on a very high mountain. Jesus is shown all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. *"All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."* Jesus is offered authority, but not the kind that comes through military might, political domination or conquering power. The kind of kingdom that crushes enemies and secures borders through force. With the words, *"Worship me, and you can rule,"* the tempter embodies an obsession with control. It is a drive to dominate, a belief that the world is changed primarily through coercion and force. Again, Jesus refuses. *"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."* The devil leaves, and suddenly angels come and wait on him. Jesus has passed the tests.

Knowing our spiritual center and that we are loved by God gives us the strength for what we are to face. Satan in Matthew represents every attempt to distort that spiritual center into self-preservation, spectacle, or domination. We see it in political systems, religious institutions, and even well-meaning disciples. The wilderness reveals what kind of Messiah Jesus will be. Faithful, trusting and obedient to the voice that calls him Beloved. And perhaps that is where Lent journeys lead us; to linger. Not on our ability to resist temptation, but on the persistent invitation to trust the voice that has already called us, named us, and claims us his beloved people and to behave Christianly.

In Jesus, name. Amen.