

Temptation

Matthew 4:1-11

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On the one hand, of course, this is a story about Jesus. After his baptism, when the heavenly voice identifies him as God's beloved son (Matthew 3:17), the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, where a cosmic conflict takes place (4:1-11). Satan tests Jesus' identity—if you're really God's son, perform a miracle...make bread. If you're really God's son, push the limits of God's love...throw yourself off the temple. If you're really God's son, seize your royal power...and worship me. But in each case, Jesus refuses and the devil departs. In the rest of Matthew's story, Jesus will indeed miraculously provide bread with nothing more than a little boy's lunchbox (14:13-21); he will indeed abandon his personal safety, trusting only in God as he gives up his life (26:53-54); and he will indeed be given every kingdom and authority in heaven and on earth (28:18). But here Jesus rebuffs Satan's offers, apparently because they represent profound misunderstandings of divine sonship. This is a story about Jesus that clarifies what it means that he is God's son.¹

On the other hand, though, this is also a story about Israel—or, as Matthew might have it, about the church, because the church is called to be what Israel is called to be. There are several clues Matthew drops to suggest that this story about Jesus is also a story about us.

First of all, Matthew adds to the story he shares with Luke the little detail that Jesus fasts in the wilderness for forty days *and forty nights* (4:2). Now, granted, when Luke says Jesus eats nothing for forty days (Luke 4:2) he probably doesn't mean that Jesus runs out to Burger King at night: but there's a clear biblical allusion in Matthew's phrase, "forty days and forty nights," that sounds like Moses, who repeatedly goes without food and drink for forty days and forty nights in Deuteronomy (9:9, 18, 25; 10:10), during his long and painful struggle to get the people to be faithful to God's covenant. By adding that little detail of forty days *and forty nights*, Matthew reminds us of Moses and Israel in the wilderness even as we think about Jesus in the wilderness.

The second feature of Matthew's story that calls my attention to Moses and Israel is that every time Jesus responds to Satan's taunts, he responds with words from Deuteronomy. "One does not live by bread alone" is Deuteronomy 8:3; "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" is Deuteronomy 6:16; and "Worship the Lord your God...only" is Deuteronomy 6:13. These three citations from Deuteronomy make the forty days and forty nights from Deuteronomy 9 look a lot less accidental than they might otherwise appear.

The third reason I think we're supposed to think corporately as well as individually about the story of Jesus' temptation is that, by the time Matthew gets to this part of his narrative, he's already said over and over how much Jesus looks like Moses. As an infant, Jesus' identity is hidden from a wicked ruler who murders baby boys in a jealous rage, and the child Jesus miraculously ends up in Egypt, from which he returns to begin his ministry. These stories from Matthew 2 remind us of Moses. And if Jesus reminds us of Moses, then perhaps we as the church ought to remind ourselves of

Israel...particularly Israel in the wilderness.

Which brings us back to the temptation. Satan plays on Jesus' hunger and says, "turn these stones into bread." Make manna for yourself, Jesus. Use your divine sonship to meet your own needs. Israel doesn't trust God to provide food in the wilderness, but Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8 to say that the reason for the manna is to teach the people to rely on God. God's gift of food is not merely to meet human need, but to express the character of covenant relationship: food is what it looks like when "you shall be my people and I will be your God" (cf. Exodus 6:7). The temptation for Jesus—and for the church—is to take perfectly good care of ourselves rather than to trust God.

Satan then takes Jesus' affirmation of faith in God and turns it against him. Okay, he says, if you would rather trust God than yourself, throw yourself down. The Bible says God will take care of you (Psalm 91:11-12). But this, too, is what Israel does in the wilderness at Massah, when thirst makes the people wonder, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 17:7) and they put God to a test. Put up or shut up, God, they say—and that's what Satan urges Jesus to do. Or us. Give us a sign, God; show us your stuff. Give us a sign so we know for sure what you're up to. But Jesus refuses to allow anyone or anything to force God's hand. "Do not put the Lord your God to a test." God is not at your beck and call.

Finally, the devil goes for the brass ring. You can be king right now, Jesus, if you'll worship me. Fall down before that golden calf and forget all this delayed gratification. You can have it all—power and prestige, a big suburban church and a salary to match—if only you'll ignore the cross. Follow Israel's lead and defy the first commandment. And Jesus says, "Begone, Satan. Worship the Lord your God...only."

That phrase, "Begone, Satan," occurs twice in Matthew's gospel—here and at Caesarea Philippi (16:23), when Peter rebukes Jesus for predicting his own death. And the two stories are connected by more than just that phrase. The devil's taunting of Jesus constitutes the same demonic misunderstanding of Jesus' identity that Peter's inadequate confession of faith does. Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, not because he is a miracle-worker or a great teacher or a good man, but because he is the Crucified. Peter's squeamishness about Jesus' death is precisely the appeal of the devil's temptations. Why bother with the cross when you can go straight for the glory right now? One of the bandits crucified with Jesus says it most brazenly, using the devil's own words: "If you are the Son of God, *come down from the cross*" (27:40).²

The demonic character of the temptations is that they highlight exactly who Jesus is—the divine son who can and does feed the world with bread, the crucified son who does not throw himself off the temple but who gives his life as a ransom for many, the glorified son to whom all power and authority in heaven and on earth are given. But the devil offers Jesus those things without the cross, and thus misunderstands both who Jesus is and what God is doing.

The same, of course, is true of us, because to misunderstand Jesus is inevitably to misunderstand ourselves—and *vice versa*. The devil's temptations can have an alarmingly contemporary ring to them. "Turn these stones into bread": take good care of yourself; use the awesome power you have, and the gifts and affluence and ability you have to protect yourself and provide for yourself and be a self-sufficient, self-made adult. Or, if you're going to believe in God instead, "throw yourself down": if you trust in God, be sure you get a receipt, or at least a guarantee. It's as easy to blackmail

God with the Bible today as it was 2000 years ago.

But the greatest temptation is to claim what's rightly yours—"all this is yours"—by worshipping something other than God alone. Although golden calves and personified devils may be less tempting today than they once were, other graven images of God are just as attractive. We cut God down to a manageable, human size when we claim God's loyalty in political or social struggles, when we impose on God the symbols of our culture, or when we limit God to the specific metaphors of our faith tradition. The god who can be addressed only in masculine language, or the god who approves only of capitalism or only of socialism, or the god who punishes homosexuals with AIDS is not the one God who alone can rightly claim our worship. The God who demands our loyalty and who alone deserves it cannot be captured by stone monuments in courthouses or religious slogans or patriotism or political correctness or even, God forbid, ecclesiastical orthodoxy.

Jesus in the wilderness reminds me of Israel in the wilderness, and Israel reminds me of us. Where Israel falls into temptation, Jesus triumphs, and it is only by his victory that we, too, are able to answer the devil's tests. Those offers of bread and safety and glory are made to us, too, even as they were made to Jesus, but they come to us only at this table, a table that stands under the shadow of the cross. And as God raised Jesus from death, so God will raise us to preach and teach and heal in his name, not because we are able to do those things any more than we can withstand the temptations of the devil, but because all authority has been given to Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20). Resistance to temptation belongs not to us but to Jesus, who gives us all things. "Thanks be to God, our saving Lord, who daily bears the burden of our lives. God is for us a God of victory."

Notes

¹ This sermon is indebted to John P. Meier's reading of the text in his New Testament Message volume, *Matthew* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1980), 28-34.

² Charles B. Cousar tells a revealing story about a BBC interview with a popular American television preacher in *A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 88. Although Cousar is looking at Paul's theology of the cross, the story illustrates Matthew's as well, as does Cousar's perceptive analysis of the relationship between cross and resurrection. The interviewer asks the preacher what he thinks of Jesus:

"Jesus," the preacher replied, "was the most successful religious figure of all time. Just consider it. He began in obscure surroundings amid poverty and despair; and today his followers outnumber those of any other of the world's religions. That's astounding."

"But I thought he ended up on a cross," the interviewer said.

"Oh, no! He was raised from the dead. The cross was something he had to endure, as any successful person must endure hardships. But he arose from the dead. He overcame the cross and put all that behind him."