

Sermon – February 26, 2023  
“Temptation of Jesus”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit come. Visit and fill our open hearts, anointing the sharing of these words and making them a blessing for your people that continues our transformation into Christ’s image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen*

Good morning and welcome to the season of Lent! Easter is not far away. I hope that we have opened our hearts to additional times of reflection and prayer as we journey through this season. We are meeting this afternoon at Fairfields UMC to pray for the students at Asbury, their transition into next steps with Jesus, and for the continued growth of the move of Jesus on their campus and on other campuses and in other communities including our own. We are also gathering as a Charge on Thursday evenings at 6 pm at Fairfields for a time of prayer. I encourage us to come as we are able to join together in prayer in this season. Let me remind us there are devotional books available for Lent. Please take one and leave a donation as you are able.

Let’s recall Adam and Eve’s encounter with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Hopefully, their story is a well-known story for us and if not, let me point us to Genesis 2:15 – 3:24. But let me share some of the key points found there. Adam and Eve were given a command by God not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The crafty serpent came to the woman in the garden and tempted her, using God’s words in a less than forthright manner. The serpent deceived Eve about the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and when she 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.”<sup>1</sup> Adam was tested by the serpent. He had been given all the trees of the garden for food except for the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, yet he ate that which was forbidden to him. He was tempted and gave into that temptation and, with his

failure, sin entered into humanity. Adam, who was in a perfect relationship with God, walking with God in the garden in the cool of the evening, fell to the tempter and sinned. Let me point out Adam's response to God when God came to ask what Adam had done. In response to God's question to Adam asking if he had eaten from the tree from which God had commanded him not to eat, Adam responded with, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Recently, a colleague pointed out to me that in the Hebrew language, the three phrases of Adam's response to God would be in decreasing emphasis, so Adam's response to God would sound like "the woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Adam blames God for Eve, blames Eve for giving him the fruit, and then quietly admits to God that he ate from the forbidden tree. We also know the immediate results of Adam's actions. Adam and Eve are put out of the garden, and sin and its consequence, death, enters into humanity, and God's rescue plan for humanity begins.

In this morning's text, Jesus has been led by the Spirit into the wilderness and to fast there for forty days. Forty days is a long fast, and at the end of the fast, Jesus is weak from hunger. He is at a low point to resist temptation, especially temptation related to providing food for his flesh. The number forty should also remind us of Israel's exodus from Egypt and Israel's time in the wilderness when God was present with them. For Israel, forty years was a time of refinement, of learning to walk with God, of trying to keep the instructions God had for His people for how they were to live which were given in the Torah or the Law. And as we read God's word, we find that Israel was also not able to keep God's Law even though God's Law included the process of sacrifice for atonement of sins, a process that provided a pathway to bring those who failed to keep God's Law back into relationship with God. Israel's struggle, a struggle to keep God's Law and live as God asked them to live, ends with their being exiled from the Promised Land with only a remnant from Israel returning to rebuild the temple and seek again to live as God's people in a manner that keeps God's Law. Israel and all humanity need a more powerful sacrifice to not only atone for sin but to change their hearts so that they might live victoriously as God's people.

And in the fullness of time, Jesus came. Jesus was God incarnate, God in the flesh, and he dwelt among his people. Jesus has just been baptized, the Spirit descends upon Jesus, and God speaks over His beloved son. Immediately following those events, Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit, fasts for forty days, and he is described as famished. Jesus is physically

weak. His flesh needs, cries out for, and desires nourishment. And at that moment, the devil shows up in the wilderness to tempt Jesus. Don't miss the understanding that temptation by the devil is testing by God. The devil tempts us to separate us from God and God allows us to be tested to bring forth good in our lives. The first temptation is for Jesus to fulfill the extreme hunger that he is now experiencing in his own power and not to trust God to provide for the needs of his flesh. The devil's temptation is to get Jesus to use the power of the Son of God that Jesus has set aside in the flesh in order to meet his own needs. Jesus does not enter into a deep theological debate with the devil, but allows the Spirit to lead him to scripture stored away in his heart, and he tells the devil we are to live on the word that comes from the mouth of God. God is adequate for our lives. Jesus' response to the first temptation is to tell the devil he will rely on God.

The devil is not bothered by his failure to successfully tempt Jesus to feed himself and moves on to a greater temptation. The devil now misuses or misquotes the scripture, as he did with God's command to Adam and Eve in the garden. The devil asks Jesus to put God to the test and throw himself down from the high point of the temple to prove that God will protect him. Jesus' response, again from scripture, is that we are not to test God. Jesus trusts God and will not test Him to satisfy the devil's desire for proof of who Jesus is, God's son. Jesus again responds to the devil with scripture, saying, "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Jesus will not offer proof to the devil that he is God's son. Jesus has heard the words from God at his baptism that confirm who he is, and Jesus will follow the Father's will. Proving he is God's son by testing God does not fit within the will of the Father.

The devil changes tactics and moves Jesus to a place where all the kingdoms of the earth are available for him to see. The devil offers all of them to Jesus if he will worship the devil instead of God. The devil is offering Jesus all that the devil holds on earth if Jesus will worship the devil in place of God. The devil does know scripture and he may know that Jesus is to suffer as God's chosen one so that he might receive all authority in heaven and on earth. The devil in this temptation offers Jesus all authority on earth without the suffering, without the cross, if Jesus will worship him. Suffering, great suffering, lies ahead of Jesus and the devil offers him a way to rule on the earth and avoid the coming suffering. Jesus, full of the Spirit, does two things when tempted in this way. First, he sends the devil away. Notice that Jesus calls the devil "Satan." He calls the devil by his name and tells him, "Away with you!" Jesus sends the devil away in the

power of the Spirit. And Jesus also once again uses scripture to overcome this temptation, telling Satan, "...it is written 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"<sup>ii</sup> Jesus succeeds in testing where Adam failed, where Israel failed. Jesus succeeds in resisting the temptations brought to him by the devil. Jesus is tested but remains sinless. We should realize that Jesus is fully human. Jesus does not stand up to the temptations the devil brings to him as God, but as flesh and blood, as one who is fully human, as one of us. We should realize that Jesus is filled with the Spirit. It is the Spirit who led him into the wilderness, and it is the Spirit who gives him the strength and power to resist the devil and send Satan away. And finally, we need to realize that Jesus knows God's word and stands during testing upon the word of God. All the temptations that come to humanity Jesus experiences, yet he does not fall to them. Here in this testing, the devil has come to Jesus at his point of greatest weakness, and Jesus, filled with the Spirit, responds in a manner that is consistent with God's will. Jesus remains sinless and, as such, is able to be the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice needed to free humanity from bondage to sin and death.

Don't miss that Jesus is fully human. That Jesus is able to face the temptations of the devil means that we also, as humans filled with Holy Spirit, are able to resist temptation. We are not made to sin by the devil. There is no "The devil made me do it" for Christians. Sin is always our choice. What we have available to help us is the same power that was in Jesus, power to strengthen us to resist temptation and to live lives as triumphant citizens in the kingdom of God. Jesus is victorious where Adam failed in the Garden of Eden. Jesus is victorious after his forty days in the wilderness where Israel failed after their forty years in the wilderness. Fully human Jesus is victorious as one who is filled with the Spirit. We should be prepared for our own testing, for times in our lives when we are in the wilderness, weak and vulnerable, and the devil comes to us with temptation. How do we get ready? First, we need to learn scripture. We should be like John Wesley and be people of one Book, the Bible. Each time Jesus resists the devil during his temptation, he quotes scripture. All of the quotes Jesus uses here are from the book of Deuteronomy. Jesus has the word of God stored away in his heart, and when he is tested, he has those words available for Holy Spirit to bring to mind so that he may refute the devil's temptations and pass God's test. We need to know more of our Bible than just John 3:16. Knowing that verse is a great start, but if that is the only arrow we have in our quiver, then we may struggle to be victorious in battle and pass the testing we will experience. Could we quote

from Deuteronomy as Jesus did? Maybe a verse from one of the Gospels? Verses from Hebrews might be very helpful. Romans holds many verses that could be key for our victory. The list goes on. The point is to open our Bibles, read them, and let Holy Spirit identify verses we need to know and then work at getting them into our hearts.

Next, we are to ask for strength to withstand the temptations of the devil. We are to pray and ask Jesus to give us Holy Spirit power! Resurrection power is the key to living victoriously as Jesus lived. We are to be filled with Holy Spirit. To receive Holy Spirit, we are to ask and expect to be filled. So, start and end each day by asking Jesus to give us Holy Spirit power for that day.

Let's say we have been memorizing scripture and we have asked for Holy Spirit strength and the tempter comes, and we fail God's test. God tests us and yet we fall into the same sin we have fallen into before. What do we do? Do we stop following Jesus, give in to sin, and live in our sin? No. Jesus Christ died for our sins and we have been washed clean by the blood of Jesus. We are Christians. When we fall, we get back up. Let me say that again: when we fall, we get back up! We confess our sin to God, we acknowledge that we have sinned, and we live in the grace that Jesus gives us. We don't confess our sin and receive grace to continue to sin. We confess our sin to receive forgiveness, and we get up and keep following Jesus. The cycle of sin, confession, and forgiveness is not meant to be an infinite progression of failures, but an extension of infinite grace to repentant hearts that restores us to relationship with God. God does not love us any less when we fall than when we stand. God is faithful and His love is steadfast. Pray for strength of the Spirit, learn more of God's word, and let Holy Spirit guide us as we prepare for our next test. As fully human Jesus was filled with the Spirit and succeeded when he was tested in the wilderness, we, who are filled with Holy Spirit, forgiven, and restored to God by Jesus' death and shed blood, who have asked again for strength, have asked Jesus to heal our brokenness, and have accepted forgiveness and mercy and are now trusting Jesus and following him, we can also be successful when we are tested. We are followers of Christ, Christians. When we fall, we repent, receive forgiveness, get up, and in grace keep following Jesus.

From the other Gospels, we know that Jesus will face other temptations. The devil leaves him in the wilderness until an opportune time in the future. Jesus will face other tests and Jesus will continue to live and even die victoriously. Jesus will go to the cross and die for our sins. He will be raised from the dead and will receive all authority in heaven and on earth, not just the

earthly authority the devil promised to give him, but all authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus will not take the devil's path of a shortcut to partial authority but will stay in the Father's will so that humanity might be set free, and he receives all authority. The devil may know scripture and be able to quote scripture even out of context, but the devil may not have understood what God was planning to accomplish through Jesus. We are rescued through Jesus. We can all grow into the image of Jesus, one who is filled with the Spirit and victorious in all testing. John Wesley, in his notes on this passage, states, "Thus Christ answered, and thus we may answer all the suggestions of the devil." We too can be ready with the word of God in our hearts and a filling of Holy Spirit to be victorious over temptations and sin.

Now I will confess to you that I have not always been a big advocate of scripture memorization, and I find it difficult to memorize and be diligent in this discipline. I was also not a big fan of Vacation Bible School as it always seemed to me to be light on God and heavy on games and crafts. But a story a professor shared with us in a seminary class one day changed my perspective. I am sure I have shared this story before, but let me share it again this morning. The professor told us that one morning a young woman came early to his office. In fact, she was waiting for him when he arrived at 7 am. She was disheveled and distraught. He let her into his office and asked her to sit down. She was in tears and upset and he let her talk and he listened. She told him that she had gone to the train trestle the night before to jump off and end her life. She had climbed up on the structure and had stood there looking down at the dark water, yearning to be free of her pain. As she was about to jump, words came into her mind about God's love for her. She didn't know where they had come from as she had never been to church, nor did she really know what they meant, but they stopped her from jumping because she wanted to know where they had come from and the love they spoke into her heart. She knew that this professor was a teacher who would listen, and so she had been waiting for him since she climbed down off the trestle. After talking to her and asking questions, he was able to determine that her grandmother had taken her to Vacation Bible School at her grandmother's church when she was a young child, and the words that had come into her head were a memory verse she had been taught at that Vacation Bible School about God's steadfast love for her. I don't recall the verse, nor the professor who shared this story with me, but I do recall that I got from her story that the word of God, stored in our hearts, even only one verse tucked away years ago, can be used by Holy Spirit to stop us from believing the tempter's lies and to live victoriously following Jesus.

So let us each get busy storing God's word in our hearts and helping others to do the same. Let us help all in any way we can to encounter the word of God more fully so that we might be able to resist the devil and pass God's testing.

Remember, Jesus is present with us always. In our testing, he is there to help us, strengthen us, and bring the word of God to our minds. In our successes, he is there to praise God with us. In our failures, he is there to give us grace, restore us, bring us back to God, and walk with us so that we might grow from our failures and find strength and comfort in our times of need. Jesus is with us always so that we might be prepared for our next testing, and he is with us always helping us become perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. People get ready.

*Pray with me: Jesus, strengthen us with Holy Spirit. Lead us to store your word in our hearts and to love others by helping them store your word in their hearts. Holy Spirit, guide us to the words we need to have in our hearts that we might live victoriously as Jesus lived and that we might lay down our lives for others. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 35). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. Genesis 3:6

<sup>ii</sup> NRSV Matthew 4:10