

Lent 1 (A)
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Texts: Matthew 4:1-11

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The stories that we hear and the stories we tell are an important part of how we make sense of our lives and how we make decisions to chart our course for the future. For example, both of my parents grew up in the Great Depression, and looking back I can see how that shaped their very careful approach to life. The story they told themselves about the world included the warning that things could just collapse at any time, so it was essential to save and be prepared. For me, growing up during Vietnam and Watergate meant that I've learned a story about how government and leaders require transparency and public accountability. I wonder what stories have shaped how you view the world and how you find meaning and joy in life.

We have a challenge this morning with two very strange stories from the Bible. The reading from Genesis includes not only Adam and Eve, our first parents, but also a talking snake and tree with magical fruit that gives knowledge of good and evil. Many people would be skeptical of a story that ends up blaming everything bad in the world on the woman. And then the reading from Matthew is at least as difficult. The devil seems to appear in the flesh and supernaturally transports Jesus all over the place, asking him to do strange or impossible things. A lot of people struggle with even the idea of the devil.

The stories we have in our scripture readings today are rooted in the mythology of the ancient Near East. For example, the devil, or a tempter, is a character in a number of ancient religious traditions. But we don't have to be literal-minded about the devil for these stories to teach us about being tested and tempted concerning what sort of person we will be. Perhaps the question for us is whether we should trust these stories, and if so, why—not as factual accounts of events in the past, but as truthful descriptions of the experience of being human. I think it can be helpful to listen to these ancient stories because they aren't conditioned by the world we live in. A lot of the stories we hear are about progress and how right will prevail, about the forward march of technology and human goodness. Or maybe instead they're about human greed and shortsightedness that will lead to an apocalyptic future of violence and destruction. But the stories in the Bible come from a different culture entirely, so they might be able to help us think about our lives in fresh ways.

I'd like to invite you to take a dive with me into the temptation story so I can show you why I trust this story. It's not just an imaginative way of picturing how Jesus felt challenged to cut corners on his calling. It's also a way of naming some of the ways we are tempted to shortchange our calling to be God's people. And not only that, this story can strengthen us as God's people by helping us recognize how Jesus' way of compassion gives life, while the alternatives—not so much. We could image Jesus' 40 days of fasting as being like a vision quest, and what he sees ends up being very revealing.

The first temptation is to turn stones to bread. It's about whether Jesus will use his power first of all for himself. The problem isn't miraculously making bread. It's for Jesus to fix his focus on himself. Jesus' identity as Son of God was about being for others. His calling was all about

connection and community, about attending to the needs of others. For Jesus, being hungry wasn't a surprise. He went into the wilderness to fast for 40 days, and he knew that the time for attending to his hungry body would come later. He was receptive to what this time of testing would show him, and this first test revealed the sense of urgency he would feel about his own needs. There would be nothing remarkable if Jesus were to put his own hunger first. That's what people have always done—and it is why the world is the way it is. There is poverty and suffering and conflict because pretty much everyone consistently puts their own needs and wants and desires first. But Jesus resists the demanding tug of self by insisting that human beings need to do more than only meet physical needs in order to be truly human. In doing so, Jesus takes the first step on a new path, a healing path, a saving path, and it's a path we can follow.

The second temptation is to leap from the pinnacle of the temple, to create a huge spectacle demonstrating that Jesus is God's chosen One. The problem is that it's nothing more than a kind of bait-and-switch. Jesus' calling is to show that life with God is about compassion and forgiveness for others. Life with God is about humility and generosity and seeking justice. Anything else is just a distraction, which is what leaping from the temple would be. "Look, here's something shiny!" Jesus' way is about living a life that creates connection and community. It's the only way ahead to a future not defined by division and conflict. Jesus' way is the only path to wholeness for the human family. And Jesus' way doesn't provide any guarantee that bad things won't happen. For that reason, the huge spectacle isn't just beside the point, it's also misleading. But Jesus refuses the distracting spectacle as nothing more than trying to control God. In doing so, Jesus takes the first step on a new path, a healing path, a saving path, and it's a path we can follow.

The third temptation is for Jesus to gain power over the world by worshiping the devil, and this would betray Jesus' calling in two ways. One is pretty obvious. Jesus sends the devil away with the reminder that scripture says to worship only the Lord your God. That means worshiping the devil is completely off the table. But this temptation also would fatally compromise Jesus' way of love. Jesus's way can never be coercive or dominating. Jesus recognizes every person as loved by God. There is no room for diminishing others by treating them as less than. Every human being is treasured by our Creator in the same way that our Creator treasures us. Jesus' way of living cannot possess or dominate other people or wield power over them. Instead, we respect and care for each other as fellow children of God. Jesus not only rejects violence and abuse. He also rejects any way of using power that dominates and stands over others. Jesus takes the first step on a new path, a healing path, a saving path, and it's a path that we can follow.

I worry that far too often the church takes the path of taking care of self, or the path of a big spectacle, or the path of power over others. For example, every December when we hear about the "war on Christmas," I'm afraid it's really nothing more than power over others. And when Christian nationalists push for special privileges for churches, I'm afraid it's nothing more than a focus on self. But that is not a new path, or a healing path, or a saving path. It's the same old path that humanity has been following for generations, and it's led us to the mess we're in right now.

The reason I trust the story Matthew tells about the temptation is not because I believe it's a factual account of Jesus' experience. It's not because I believe the idea of the devil is a particularly helpful idea. I trust Matthew's story because I believe in Jesus' way of love, not being fixated on our own wants and needs and desires. I believe Jesus' way of being for others is the only way to a future I want to live in. I believe in Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness. I believe that Jesus' way of humility and generosity and seeking justice is the only way to create connection and community. Any big spectacle is entirely beside the point. I believe in Jesus' vision for the human family. Every person is a beloved child of God. That means that we cannot use power in dominating, controlling ways. We don't treat anyone as beneath us. No person is an object we can manipulate, because the path to a human family made whole is a path of equality and mutuality. I trust Matthew's story of the temptation because it helps me see how to follow Jesus, and it helps me see that the alternative is just more of the same—more suffering and cruelty and conflict. I don't want more of the same. I want to follow Jesus. Amen.