



The Lessons We Learn from the People We Meet

## Along the Way

### The People We Meet Along the Way: The Tempter

Matthew 4:1-11

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*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

On this first Sunday of Lent, I have to confess something to you: if you go looking for "Lent" in the Bible, you aren't going to find it. It's a practice, a season we Christians developed. Different traditions point to different moments in time as the origin of Lent, but suffice it to say, it emerged in response to a perceived need for us to recenter our discipleship. To draw attention to the costliness of faith, because if faith offers us comfort (which it does), faith also asks something of us. In short, it asks us to deny ourselves and follow Christ. And if you go looking for clues about how to do *that* in the Bible, you'll find a whole host of stories and ideas and examples.

Noah and his family spent 40 days and 40 nights on the ark while rain flooded down around them, paving the way for God to make tremendous promises. Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness learning to trust the Lord. Elijah spent 40 days in the wilderness before hearing the still, small voice of God on the same mountain where Moses spent 40 days listening to God give the law — the 10 commandments. And then, of course, we have today's story: Jesus' own 40 days in the wilderness, a story that takes place right after his baptism, right before his ministry begins, during which he is tested and tempted by the devil.

Lent was formed and fashioned from these stories. And so the season of Lent is 40 days, which really is Bible talk for "a long enough period of time for you to have to wrestle with some hard questions." Journeys like that are difficult, though. The Bible makes that plain. And so along our way through Lent here at Shandon, we'll turn to the scripture texts assigned to these weeks and seek guidance and companionship from characters in the story who accompanied Jesus along his way. Before we get to those folks, though, we have to begin with the one whose story is part of the rationale for this season anyway: the devil.

Now I don't know what you think about the devil. I'm not even 100 percent sure what I think about the devil all the time, but I can tell you this: I believe evil exists. I believe evil exists in ways that are tangible and real. I believe evil has strength and cunning. I believe evil can get the better of us at any time, but that evil is particularly successful when we are vulnerable. And I believe that one of evil's very best tricks is making itself sound ... reasonable. Not extreme. Not terrible. Not questionable. Just ... reasonable. And in today's reading

from the Gospel of Mathew, all of that is wrapped up in a figure called the devil. Or, as he's referred to once, the tempter.

I have preached sermons before on this passage, about how it is a question of identity. "If you are the Son of God..." *If you are.* But I have come to think there's another way to think about it. If it's not a question of identity, but of action, if the devil is actually saying, "Since you are the Son of God, do these things..." Because temptation is less about our identity and more about our behavior. To know who we are is one thing; to act like it is another.

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." Willam Sloane Coffin, longtime pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, suggests that here the devil appeals to Jesus', and our, commitment to justice. It's a strange thing to think about, because we don't expect the devil to care about justice at all, but stay with him. He says, it's almost as if the devil were saying, "Look, Jesus, you're hungry. So are countless other people all over the world. The world hasn't been treated right, so crops can't grow everywhere they once could, and there's a whole web of issues with how food is distributed. And didn't the prophet promise that justice would roll down like waters? There are hungry people and you could do something about that. Are you or are you not the Bread of Life?"<sup>1</sup>

Doesn't that sound ... reasonable? Who could *reasonably* argue against feeding hungry people?

But the one who is the Bread of Life, the one who will go on to feed 5000 and countless others, says, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Because God is about justice. Of course God is. And God dreams of the day when every belly is full and every hunger is satisfied. Of course God does. But God is not just about justice, which is why the Son of God has to define his mission in terms of more than just bread alone. Justice is good, and God is about justice, but God is about more than justice, too.

The same thing happens with the second temptation. "Throw yourself down from this high place," the devil says, "and let the angels swoop in and rescue you." "Imagine," the devil says, "how many people might follow you, if they understood you to be a shield against all kinds of hurt. Imagine how powerful you would appear if no harm could come your way. And it's not just about you, Jesus — you love these people. Of course you want them to follow you. Of course you want to protect them from harm."

This, too, seems ... reasonable. Who could *reasonably* argue against protecting the ones you love?

Because God is about protection — God shelters us under God's wing like a mother hen. And God is about power — power to undo the forces that seek to harm any of God's children. But Jesus says, "Again, it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Because again, God is about protection, God is about powerful protection, but that is not all God is about.

Similarly with the third temptation. The devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and then says, "I'll give you all of this, if you will worship me." Here the devil attacks Jesus' commitment to liberation. "Do you see all those people in all those kingdoms, so many of them living under some oppressive regime or another, all of them beholden to compromised ways of living. Don't you remember the prophet promising, 'The Lord will set free all the families of Judah.' If they were yours, you could ascend the throne now and they could live according your rule now. You could let the people live freely now."

And again ... it sounds so reasonable. Who could *reasonably* argue against freedom from oppression?

Because God is about liberation, but — you know what I'm about to say — that is not all God is about. All three of these temptations seem reasonable. Even more than that — by many measures, they might even seem faithful. Because justice and power and protection and liberation and freedom are all astonishingly good things.

Did you notice the devil doesn't pretend otherwise? What he places before Jesus is the temptation to seize one of those things and say, "This! *This* is what God is about" — but that would come at the expense of

everything *else* God is about. Because to reduce God to being all about one thing, well, that would be to reduce God, period. And that is what the devil, or the tempter, or whatever you want to call him, that's what he wants. When we make God smaller, there's more room for evil to worm its way into this world. The bigger God is, the more room there is for all of us under God's wing. The smaller God is, the less room there is, and the less room there is, the more we turn against each other. And when we as Christians turn against each other ...

Did you hear about the Asbury Revival? At Asbury University in Kentucky, a regular chapel service started on February 8, and didn't stop until this past Friday, February 23. It wasn't planned. The service back on February 8 drew towards a close and some students decided they wanted to keep singing a bit longer. For two weeks, tens of thousands of people descended upon this small Christian college to sing and pray. It was acoustic and unrehearsed and even those who traveled hours to attend mostly arrived without clear plans for where they would stay. It was, those in attendance said over and over again, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. What was decidedly not an outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the commentary all over the internet. Spend a few minutes on Google and you can find predictable critiques from both conservatives and liberals questioning the righteousness of what was happening. Debates erupted about whether it was a real revival or a charade, about whether the belief system of Asbury University itself needed to be taken into consideration, about the merit of praise music, about how long the administration would let this disrupt the academic calendar, about personal versus performative prayer, and on and on and on. I suspect you don't need me to tell you that 98 percent of the criticism of a gathering that had absolutely no agenda beyond singing and prayer came from self-professing Christians.

This is just the latest example, but it is by no means the only example, of what happens when we get it our heads that God is only about one thing, or that God can only be praised one way, or that God can only be rightly experienced under one system of beliefs. I don't know anything more about what was going on at Asbury beyond this: Songs were sung. Prayers were said. God was praised. And I believe that was pleasing to God.

One of the temptations Christians face is to believe that there is one set of parameters around God. This has significant repercussions in our communal life, but it has significant repercussions in our individual lives, too. We run the risk of losing so much — not just opportunities to learn more about God, but time and energy to serve God, too.

So I suggest to you: one way to travel through Lent this year is to actively seek to see God expressed in new ways. To experience God through new practices. Resist the temptation of assuming God will only show up the way you have always known God to show up. Or to put it another way: resist the temptation of assuming you know how or where God won't show up.

Here's what I mean: If you have always known God through the work of justice, seek God through contemplation and prayer. If you have always known God through meditation, seek God through community outreach. If you have always known God to be powerful, seek God among the meek. If you have always known God intellectually, seek God through creative expression. If you have always known God through prayer on your own, seek God through praying with someone else. However you have always known God, seek a new way, and see what happens.

This sort of stretching is not easy or comfortable. But it is faithful. And I have it on good authority that if we are willing to give it a try, the same angels that tended to Jesus, will come and care for you along the way.

<sup>1</sup> William Sloane Coffin, throughout his years at Riverside, preached this interpretation of the temptations multiple times. This sermon is indebted to his insight and that section of the sermon is largely shaped by it.