

MATTHEW

4 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2** After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. **3** The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. **6** "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. **9** "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

ONE DAY A FATHER WAS TEACHING HIS YOUNG SON HOW THROW A BASKETBALL INTO THE HOOP.

THE MAN SHOWED HIM AND EXPLAINED IT REALLY WAS NOT HARD TO DO, IF THE BOY AIMED CORRECTLY AND PUT SOME MUSCLE INTO HIS SHOT.

AGAIN AND AGAIN THE BOY TRIED BUT EITHER FELL SHORT, OR THE BALL BOUNCED OFF THE HOOP INSTEAD OF GOING THROUGH IT.

HIS FATHER CONTINUED TO ENCOURAGE HIM, AND ASSURED HIS SON ONCE MORE, THAT IT WAS NOT AS DIFFICULT TO DO AS HE SEEMED TO THINK,

FINALLY, THE BOY, LOOKED UP AT HIS DAD, WHO TOWERED OVER HIM AND EXCLAIMED:

"IT'S EASY FOR YOU UP THERE. YOU DON'T KNOW HOW HARD IT IS FROM DOWN HERE!"

THOSE WORDS MIGHT JUST AS EASILY BE EXPRESSED BY PEOPLE TO GOD IN HEAVEN, ABOUT OBEYING HIS COMMANDS.

INDEED EVEN WHEN WE SUMMARIZE THE 10 COMMANDMENTS AS TELLING US TO LOVE GOD COMPLETELY, AND LOVE OTHERS AS WE LOVE OURSELVES-IT IS NOT EASY TO LIVE IN COMPLETE OBEDIENCE.

THIS IS ONE OF THE MANY REASONS THE INCARNATION OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST IS GOOD NEWS FOR US.

JESUS, AS A REAL HUMAN BEING ACTUALLY DOES UNDERSTAND JUST HOW HARD IT IS TO LIVE IN OBEDIENCE TO GOD OUR FATHER.

INDEED, JESUS WAS TEMPTED IN EVERY WAY JUST LIKE WE ARE, AND TEMPTED IN WAYS BEYOND OUR OWN EXPERIENCES AS WELL.

THIS BRINGS US TO CONSIDER THE GOSPEL STORY WHICH DESCRIBES A MILESTONE IN THE LIFE OF JESUS, AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO HEAR AND REMEMBER. THE STORY.

WE BEGIN ON THIS FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT WITH WHAT IS FOR MANY OF US-- THE ALL TOO FAMILIAR STORY ABOUT JESUS BEING TESTED BY SATAN IN THREE DIFFERENT WAYS.

BUT WHILE THE STORY MAY BE WELL KNOWN IT IS NOT NECESSARILY SEEN AS ESPECIALLY RELEVANT FOR MOST PEOPLE.

ONE PROBLEM IN APPLYING THE STORY TO OUR LIVES HAS TO DO WITH OUR CULTURAL PORTRAYAL OF THE DEVIL.

IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO GET OUT OF OUR HEADS THE IMAGE OF A GUY WITH HORNS ON HIS HEAD, DRESSED A RED OUTFIT WITH A CAPE TO MATCH, CARRYING A PITCHFORK.

IT IS HARD TO TAKE THAT PORTRAYAL OF THE DEVIL THAT POPS UP AROUND HALLOWEEN, AND ALSO SOMETIMES IN ADVERTISEMENTS, SERIOUSLY.

AND IN THE MOVIES THE DEVIL IS OFTEN PORTRAYED AS A HANDSOME-CEO TYPE OF MAN.

OR, ONCE IN A WHILE, THE DEVIL IS DEPICTED AS A BEAUTIFUL- SEDUCTIVE TYPE OF WOMAN.

BUT NONE OF THESE IMAGES FIT VERY WELL WITH THE ADVERSARY WHOM JESUS ENCOUNTERED IN THE WILDERNESS.

SO, THE BEST WAY TO APPROACH TODAY'S GOSPEL STORY IS TO AVOID ENVISIONING WHAT SATAN LOOKED LIKE.

WE DO BEST IF WE FOCUS INSTEAD, ONLY ON HIS WORDS TO JESUS-AND THE SAVIOR'S ANSWERS.

OF COURSE, THE DIALOGUE – ITSELF IS ANOTHER ROADBLOCK FOR SOME, IN TRYING TO RELATE TO THE STORY.

LET'S FACE IT-THE TESTING JESUS FACED IS NOT WHAT WE WILL HAVE TO DEAL WITH.

AFTER ALL, NONE OF US WOULD BE TEMPTED IN THE SMALLEST WAY TO TURN A STONE INTO BREAD.

WE WOULD HAVE LITTLE TROUBLE KEEPING OURSELVES FROM JUMPING OFF A SKY-SCRAPPER OR A TALL BRIDGE JUST TO SEE IF GOD WOULD SEND AN ANGEL TO CATCH US.

AND WHILE-THE IDEA OF BEING RULER OF THE WORLD, MIGHT BE A FLEETING FANTASY FOR SOME-NO SANE PERSON WOULD SERIOUSLY THINK HE OR SHE WOULD ACTUALLY BE OFFERED THE POSITION.

HOW THEN ARE WE CHRISTIANS TODAY SUPPOSED TO UNDERSTAND THIS STORY?

IS IT AN EVENT THAT HAD SIGNIFICANCE FOR JESUS ALONE-OR IS THERE A MESSAGE HERE FOR OUR OWN INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL LIVES AS WELL?

THE ANSWER IS- WHILE HIS OVERCOMING THE TEMPTATIONS PLACED BEFORE HIM WAS SPECIFICALLY RELEVANT TO JESUS' MINISTRY-WE ALSO CAN LEARN FROM IT.

THE HEART OF THE TESTING FOR JESUS AND FOR US, HAS TO DO WITH HOW WE IDENTIFY OURSELVES.

DO WE SEE OURSELVES AS SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE ALMIGHTY AND THUS SUBJECT TO HIS AUTHORITY AND WILL, OR DO WE THINK WE HAVE COMPLETE AUTONOMY?

IF IS IT THE LATTER VIEW-WE WILL JOIN IN SINGING THE SONG "MY WAY", MADE FAMOUS BY FRANK SINATRA.

SOME OF THE LYRICS PROCLAIM: "I PLANNED EACH CHARTERED COURSE EACH CAREFUL STEP ALONE THE BY-WAY, AND MORE MUCH MORE THAN THIS I DID IT MY WAY.

YES THERE WERE TIMES I'M SURE YOU KNEW WHEN I BIT OFF MORE THAN I COULD CHEW.

BUT THROUGH IT ALL WHEN THERE WAS DOUBT I ATE IT UP AND SPIT IT OUT. I FACED IT ALL AND I STOOD TALL AND DID IT MY WAY."

JESUS MODELS FOR US THE ALTERNATIVE TO THE MESSAGE OF THE SONG.

HE CERTAINLY COULD HAVE DONE THINGS HIS WAY, BUT INSTEAD HE CHOSE TO FOLLOW HIS FATHER'S WILL.

THE DEVIL'S PURPOSE WAS TO DRAW JESUS AWAY FROM GOD TO CHOOSE ANOTHER WAY, ONE THAT SUITED SATAN'S PURPOSE RATHER THAN GOD'S PLANS.

THE KEY TO OUR UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF THE PASSAGE IS FOUND IN HOW THE DEVIL PHRASED EACH QUESTION TO JESUS, AND HOW THE SAVIOR RESPONDED.

REMEMBER-JESUS ENTERED THE WILDERNESS IMMEDIATELY AFTER HIS BAPTISM, WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT DESCENDED UPON HIM, AND GOD'S VOICE DECLARED: "THIS IS MY BELOVED SON."

SATAN APPROACHED JESUS WITH THE CHALLENGE- "IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD..." THE IMPLICATION WAS THAT SATAN QUESTIONED GOD'S PROCLAMATION ABOUT JESUS.

THE INTENTION OF THE FIRST TEMPTATION WAS MOST LIKELY TO TRY TO GET JESUS TO PROVE IN A TANGIBLE WAY WHO HE WAS, BY USING HIS POWER FOR HIS OWN PERSONAL NEEDS.

WE MAY IMAGINE SATAN SOUGHT TO POUNCE ON ANY DOUBTS OR QUESTIONS JESUS MIGHT STILL HAVE ABOUT HIS IDENTITY.

THE SECOND TEMPTATION ALSO FOCUSED ON JESUS AS THE SON OF GOD.

THIS TIME THE TEMPTER SOUGHT TO GET JESUS TO FORCE GOD INTO PROVING HIS STATUS AS THE BELOVED SON BY RESCUING HIM FROM DEATH OUTSIDE OF THE PLAN OF SALVATION.

THE THIRD TEMPTATION HAD A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT TWIST-IT DID NOT DIRECTLY CHALLENGE THE IDENTITY OF JESUS.

INSTEAD, SATAN THOUGHT TO ENTICE HIM INTO FORSAKING WHO HE WAS, AND WHAT HE HAD COME TO EARTH TO DO.

THE SUGGESTION WAS JESUS COULD SAVE THE WORLD WITHOUT GOING TO THE CROSS, BY BECOMING THE RULER OF THE WHOLE WORLD, UNDER SATAN'S AUTHORITY.

IN THESE THREE WAYS THE DEVIL SOUGHT TO SOW SEEDS OF DOUBT WITHIN JESUS, EITHER ABOUT HIS IDENTITY OR GOD'S TRUSTWORTHINESS.

NOTICE, IN EACH CASE SATAN, THE DECEIVER, MADE SUGGESTIONS AND PROMISES THAT WERE INTENDED TO CAUSE JESUS TO SEEK HIS OWN SOLUTION TO THESE SITUATIONS.

TRULY, THE CORE INTENTION OF THE WILDERNESS TEMPTATIONS WERE NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM WHAT ADAM AND EVE ENCOUNTERED AND SUCCUMBED TO.

THEY TOO WERE GIVEN SUGGESTIONS AND MADE PROMISES, BY THE SERPENT THAT, THEY COULD BE SOMEONE DIFFERENT THAN GOD CREATED THEM TO BE.

THUS, OUR PERSONAL CONNECTION TO THE STORY IS FOUND IN THE FACT THAT AT THE HEART OF MOST TEMPTATIONS THERE IS A CHALLENGE TO OUR IDENTITY AS SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF GOD.

INCLUDED IN THIS CHALLENGE IS ALSO THE SUGGESTION WE CANNOT REALLY TRUST GOD'S WORD OR PROMISES.

AND ONCE WE BEGIN TO DOUBT OUR IDENTITY OR QUESTION GOD'S TRUTHFULNESS, OR OUR FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY TO GOD, WE WILL INEVITABLY REBEL AGAINST HIS WILL.

ONE COMMENTARY SUGGESTS MOST SIN, OCCURS BECAUSE WE EITHER DOUBT, OR DO NOT KNOW, WHO WE REALLY ARE.

IT SAYS: "ALL SIN PROCEEDS FROM A DELUDED OR PERVERTED SENSE OF SELF. "

THEN IT EXPLAINS: "IN HIS BAPTISM, JESUS RECEIVED AFFIRMATION OF HIS IDENTITY AS THE SON OF GOD.

IN ALL OF THESE TEMPTATIONS, SATAN'S TACTIC IS TO ENGENDER DOUBT IN THE MIND OF JESUS CONCERNING THE [TRUTHFULNESS] OF HIS IDENTITY."

THIS REFLECTION IS A WARNING TO US TO TURN TO GOD FOR A CORRECT UNDERSTANDING OF WHO, AND WHOSE, WE ARE.

INDEED, WE TAKE THE FIRST BABY STEPS TOWARD SIN WHEN WE ALLOW OTHER INFLUENCES, HOWEVER WELL MEANING, TO DICTATE OUR IDENTITY AS CHRISTIANS.

WE SHOULD ALSO RECOGNIZE THAT NOT ALL VOICES WE HEAR THAT SOUND REASONABLE- ARE WELL MEANING.

IN FACT, IT IS SOMETIMES THE CASE THAT SUGGESTIONS OR PROMISES ARE MADE THAT ARE INTENDED TO PERSUADE US TO MAKE CHOICES THAT ARE ACTUALLY HARMFUL TO US OR OTHERS.

FOR EXAMPLE: I CAME ACROSS AN OLD LEGEND ABOUT HOW TREES OF EVERY VARIETY IN A FOREST, GATHERED TO HAVE A MEETING.

THEY MET TO DISCUSS WAYS THEY COULD UNITE AGAINST AN AXE THAT HAD CUT DOWN SO MANY OF THEM. AFTER MUCH DISCUSSION THEY CAME UP WITH A SOLUTION.

YOU SEE, WORD REACHED THEM THE AX NEEDED A NEW HANDLE IN ORDER TO FUNCTION.

SO, THE TREES ALL AGREED THAT THEY WOULD NO LONGER SUPPLY WOOD FOR AN AXE HANDLE.

HOWEVER, THE AXE HAD SHOWED UP AT THE MEETING AND ASKED TO SPEAK. AND BY A MAJORITY VOTE -THE TREES AGREED TO ALLOW IT A FEW MINUTES TO HAVE ITS SAY.

WITH MOVING ELOQUENCE, THE AXE SAID THAT HE AGREED THAT ENOUGH WAS ENOUGH.

THE AXE PROMISED- IF GIVEN JUST ONE MORE PIECE OF WOOD FOR A NEW HANDLE, IT WOULD CUT BRUSH AND SCRUBS, BUT NOT ANY MORE TREES.

THE AXE SUGGESTED, WITH THE SMALLER PLANTS REMOVED FROM THE FOREST, THE TREES WOULD HAVE MORE RESOURCES FOR GROWTH AND COULD BE SEEN BETTER.

THE AXE SAID A FEW MORE FLATTERING WORDS, WHICH CONVINCED THE TREES TO GIVE IT A NEW HANDLE.

OF COURSE, THE AXE DID NOT TELL THE TRUTH, NOT ONLY DID IT CUT DOWN SMALLER PLANTS, IT ALSO CONTINUED TO CUT DOWN THE TREES.

THEN, WHEN THE TREES COMPLAINED ABOUT THE AXE'S DECEPTION, IT SUGGESTED THEY WERE FOOLS TO BELIEVE WHAT WAS PROMISED.

IT DECLARED: "YOU KNEW WHAT I WAS WHEN YOU SAW ME. HOW COULD YOU EXPECT ANY OTHER CONCLUSION? WHY DID YOU TRUST ME?"

THIS IS NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM PEOPLE BEING DECEIVED OR OTHERWISE TEMPTED TO SIN AND DOING IT.

IF WE THINK ABOUT IT, THERE IS OFTEN IN OUR HEARTS OR MINDS A WARNING ABOUT MAKING A BAD CHOICE, BUT WE DO NOT LISTEN.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JESUS, IN HIS HUMANITY, AND US AS HUMAN BEINGS, IS THAT JESUS ALWAYS LISTENED TO THE HOLY SPIRIT-AND NEVER LET GO OF HIS IDENTITY.

LENT OFFERS US A TIME TO ONCE AGAIN REMEMBER AND REAFFIRM OUR IDENTITY AS BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF JESUS CHRIST.

WE NEED TO LISTEN AND EMBRACE MORE FULLY THE MESSAGE OF SCRIPTURE THAT ALL WHO ARE SAVED BY JESUS ARE A NEW CREATION.

LET US STRIVE TO NEVER DOUBT OUR IDENTITY, OR GOD'S LOVE AND FAITHFULNESS.

THE MORE WE CLING TO WHO WE ARE AND OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD THE BETTER ABLE WE WILL BE TO RESIST TEMPTATION AND TO PASS THE TESTS OF FAITH WE ENCOUNTER.

LET US PRAY: GOD OF COMPASSION, WE PRAISE YOU BECAUSE OF JESUS, YOU LOOK UPON OUR HUMAN FRAILTY WITH LOVE AND UNDERSTANDING. HELP US EACH DAY TO LIVE THE NEW LIFE IN CHRIST WE ARE GIVEN. IN HIS NAME WE PRAY. AMEN

SERMON SUMMARY: MATTHEW 4:1-11

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