

## **Temptation's Game Plan** *Matthew 4:1-11, Genesis 3*

I offer two paintings taken from Scripture. In the first, see Eve reluctantly leave the garden. Her face shows the bewilderment and vulnerability. She had thought that the tree was good for food, a delight to the eyes, and desired to make one wise. But she had been wrong. Perhaps nothing is scarier for a woman than loss of home. Now, look at the painting on the cover of our bulletin. It shows the drained, exhausted face of Jesus. The face of this wrung-out Jesus reminds us how real the temptations were, how awful the price paid, and how connected to it we all are. He sees across the wilderness terrain the shadow of Golgotha – where a cross has his name stenciled: Jesus, The King of the Jews. After all, temptation is the longest running drama in the history of civilization as it continues to make human life both tragic and comedic.

At the outset, God drives Jesus into the wilderness. Life being what it is – filled with pain – shouldn't we expect a wilderness? Pain possesses the capacity to make us fully aware. No pain, no crown of consciousness. Sooner or later, don't we have to find out if we have what it takes to take on the devil? The faces of Eve and Jesus tell us all we need to know: Temptation is real, hard, and painful. Forget our silly win or lose competitions; this is live or die.

So what happened? The devil shows up. For the benefit of the few who may not believe in the devil, recall that the mystery of evil is symbolized by a person because the reality of evil is experienced as personal power. The devil is given a separate identity in the New Testament because evil is experienced as something bigger than us. Evil arises from our higher nature, which I believe, is the point of making the devil a fallen angel.

So imagine the two adversaries, swords drawn (Please note that Scripture uses "sword" as a self-descriptor: The sword of the Spirit) for this cosmic duel. Nothing in history approaches the stakes in this battle between Satan vs. Jesus.

**Satan makes the first move.** He thrusts with pugnacious arrogance, "**If you are the Son of God**, (attack at the point of doubt about identity) command these stones to become loaves of bread." The people of Palestine already lived against the grinding edge of poverty. Bread was a scarce and precious commodity. After all, children should not die from hunger, no matter who made this world, and for that reason, we should never rest until everybody has enough. After all, Jesus makes feeding people the first big test of final judgment. Jesus doesn't ask, "Did you balance the budget?" He asks "Did you feed my hungry children?" "First feed the face, then talk right or wronger," says Bertolt Brecht in the *Three-penny Opera*."

But wait. There's more at stake here than bread. Jesus is tempted to make his life nothing more than physical. The bread is really about security. We try to live securely rather than well. Is there a greater lust in America today than the lust for security? The

fear that there will not be enough traps us all. Insecurity imprisons us because we mistrust others and refuse to make ourselves available to be trusted by others. Clamoring for security, under any terms, is evidence of being afraid. We are resistant to the training offered by the gospel, for we simply cannot believe that the self can be formed without fear of the other.” Aren’t most of the “anti-movements” evidence of our fear of the other?

Last week, I received an email picture of a young African American woman with nine children gathered around her. The email’s purpose was to imply that a poor woman was having babies to scam the system out of \$144,000 a year. It is not only the racism of this attack that is disgusting, and trust me racism is disgusting and unjust. It is also the refusal to accept that systemic evil leads people to make all kinds of efforts to survive. Nowhere does this email address the scams that take place among the affluent. I started to send out an email picture of Bernie Madoff surrounded by the \$50 billion he stole. \$144,000 vs. \$50 billion. Here \$1440,000. There \$50 billion. Then a group picture of inside traders and immoral investment bankers. A neighbor hooking on to cable services without paying. The millions of well-off Americans who avoid paying income taxes. The cheating that is college athletics. The steroid usage that ruined the integrity of Major League Baseball. Or the identity theft that plagues our use of the Internet.

How many Christians have gone against Jesus in the desperate attempt to build lives made of bread alone? An actor in a play speaks for the bread-alone philosophy: “I get up, I go, I lie a little, I peddle a little, I watch the rules, I talk the talk. We fellas have those offices high up there so that we can catch the wind and go with it, however it blows.” (*A Thousand Clowns*).

**Jesus strikes back with counterthrust:** “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” We can’t live by bread alone – subsist, but not really live. Life is more than getting ahead by pushing others down. Jesus says one person is worth more than all the gold in all our banks. **“Not by bread alone.”** Maya Angelou wrote, **“To survive is important, but to thrive is elegant.”** To thrive we need the bread of life.

Jesus refuses to believe that we can be satisfied with bread alone. Jesus believes in us and knows that we possess the capacity for freedom. Point one goes to Jesus.

**Then another thrust by the devil:** **“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.’” This time, the devil throws in a bit of Scripture. (*Nothing is more dangerous than a devil with a little knowledge of Scripture unless it is a preacher*). Shouldn’t Jesus want the opportunity to prove that he is the Son of God? Shouldn’t God shield his beloved son from harm?

This is the temptation to expect God to do all the work for us. It is not faith to think God will keep us from all harm; it is laziness. We confuse God's maximum support with God's minimum protection. There are too many Christians who ask God to take care of us when we are supposed to be taking care of the world.

The church is especially vulnerable here. Preachers promise certainty, riches, and healing. The devil couldn't trick Jesus but preachers are easy pickings. So many preachers want to prove God, prove they are right, prove they are in charge, prove the Scripture, prove all the right doctrines. Don't kid yourself: authoritarian preaching is not about the gospel; it's about politics. It's about men wanting to control women. One Sunday at Riverside Church, the woman reading the story of Eve and Adam, said, "Thus ends the reading of the Old Testament lesson, in which the woman chooses consciousness." It's about the strong wanting to lord it over the weak.

What the devil can't grasp is that God does prove himself, but in the power of love. Jesus will prove what God is all about by becoming totally vulnerable, by surrendering control. Jesus takes up his cross so that God's heart can be laid bare for all to see.

Counterthrust: Jesus said to Satan, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Point two to Jesus.

Then, Satan, clumsy with Scripture, switches to an outright bribe: "I will give you all the kingdoms of the world." Isn't the irony delicious? The king of kings is offered what already belongs to him. Give the devil his due. He knows that politics is about worship and sacrifice to false gods. Politics always come down to the first two of the Ten Commandments. Temptation's game plan never changes.

The devil knows our tendencies and has studied our weaknesses. We were created for loyalty – loyalty to the truth, to the love that moves the sun and the stars and yet is found on a cross, but we overreach in the hope of being our own lord and master. This is the true meaning of our sinfulness: the active and willful attempt to overreach our powers.

Jesus dismisses this last desperate temptation with a flick of his sword: Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Now, hear the clatter of Satan's sword on wilderness rocks. Jesus refuses to worship the devil. Point three to Jesus!

Now do we see what the temptation of Jesus was all about? It was an effort to cause Jesus, and then all of us, to refuse to be faithful to the will of God, to rebel against God. The stampede for power is so furious that even the devil gets knocked down, and his mask falls off, revealing faces behind the devil. Why, it's you and me – God's creatures demanding to be in charge. It was us all along because we are unwilling to

live as creatures – as contingent and limited. This breeds insecurity which we seek to overcome by a will-to-power which overreaches the limits of human life.

Too often it is the church that betrays Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Listen to the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor telling Jesus, "The church has not been with you but with [the devil]. We took Rome and the sword of Caesar and proclaimed ourselves sole rulers of the earth." What I find startling is that a large portion of the Protestant Church stands poised to repeat the Roman Church's mistake – taking Caesar's sword, rejecting Jesus, and following the devil. Is not this ultimate irony? The Pro-testors have become Co-conspirators with Satan.

Jesus defeated Satan and all the false gods of the world, and calls his church to the same victory. So, resisting with all our strength, let us side with Jesus and arise in confidence of him who is able to keep us from falling, and to make us stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and for ever. Amen.