

Mountains of Temptation

TEXT: Matthew 4:1-11

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on March 26, 2023

The Transfiguration story we looked at last week in Matthew 17 has two direct connections back to the start of Jesus' ministry. The one in the Transfiguration story itself is the voice from the cloud that says "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." The exact same words also come from the heavens at Jesus' baptism at the end of Matthew 3, which happens immediately before the temptations in the wilderness.

The second connection comes in the context right before the Transfiguration story where Peter tells Jesus not to worry because he's not really going to suffer all those things he just predicted and Jesus responds to Peter with the words, "Get thou behind me, Satan!" That phrase is, again, almost word for word what Jesus says at the conclusion of his final trial during the temptations in the wilderness at the start of Matthew 4.

I don't think having linguistic connections like that, tied to stories that bookend Jesus' ministry, are accidental. We are meant to connect them. The question is "Why?" So, let's look more at the Temptations story and what surrounds it.

I'll remind you again that the chapter breaks and verse numbers in the Bible were added 1200 years later. They're an enormous help to us in reading the text, but don't let them trick your brain into thinking that events are unconnected just because a medieval dude named Stephen Langton decided to make a chapter break here rather than there.

Beginning in Matthew 3:16, here's what the sequence sounds like if you ignore the chapter break between Matthew 3 and Matthew 4: "16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' 4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Basic Bible study rule: When a passage begins with the word "Then," ask yourself, "When?" "After what?"

In this case, asking that question of the beginning of Matthew 4 leads us to the startling realization that the same Spirit of God that just descended on Jesus and said how pleased God was with him then proceeded to lead him up from the Jordan River valley into the harsh, mountainous wilderness surrounding the Dead Sea to be tested by the devil. Don't skip over the fact that it is the Spirit of God and not some demon that leads Jesus into this difficult time to prove his readiness for the ministry and work ahead.

With that context, the temptations story is not some kind of attack on Jesus. I see it more like Jesus' final exam, the defense of his thesis, passing the bar—whatever metaphor you want to use. The word translated as "temptation" means to prove, to examine, or to try—as in a court of law. As I wrote in Friday's Messenger to introduce this sermon, this is boot camp for the new recruit. It's harsh and difficult, but it's not mean. Jesus is baptized and comes with a strong recommendation by the Almighty, but he still has one more step before he can enter into the ministry God has called him to do. He must be tested to make sure he is ready.

What that sequence reminds me of is the beginning of the book of Job in the Hebrew Bible. If you've heard my sermons on Job, you know that Job is not a historical account. It begins with the Hebrew equivalent of "once upon a time." It's true in the way that fables and parables are true, but it's not factual.

At the outset Job's story is the challenge that frames the rest of the book. God and Satan are at a heavenly staff meeting. Satan, whose name means "accuser," has been wandering the earth, looking for wrongdoing to prosecute. God says to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil."

Satan's response is, basically, "Oh yeah? Prove it. I think Job is just good because he's had it easy. He's rich, has a great reputation, a large family, lots of friends, he's in great health—you name it. That's why he's

blameless. Take those things away and he'll drop all that upright and blameless stuff like a hot iron, and he'll curse you, God, to your face." God takes the bet and the story is off to the races.

Do you see the connection to this morning's story? Moving immediately from Jesus' baptism, where God is bragging on Jesus with a voice from heaven, to God letting Satan have a go at him in the wilderness to test all that, sounds to me like a direct parallel to the setup in Job. God says, "Hey, here's a perfect guy!" and Satan responds, "Oh yeah? Prove it. I bet I can break him."

A key thing to understand, whether you are reading Job or Matthew is that, in the Bible, the role and nature of Satan evolves across time. Satan begins in the Hebrew Bible as basically the prosecuting attorney in the divine Department of Justice, as he is in Job. There's only one other mention of Satan in the Hebrew Bible before the book of Job, and that is when Satan is testing King David in 1 Chronicles. The word "devil" doesn't appear in the Old Testament at all.

By the book of Revelation, however, Satan is a sinister figure, equated with the devil. And then, over time, a combination of the Church and popular literature landed him as we have him today—the sadistic devil in charge of burning people in hell. Hell, as we understand the concept today, was not even a thing in Old Testament times. We've already seen that even in Jesus' day, there was still a raging debate between the Pharisees and Sadducees about whether there was an afterlife at all.

That's a separate sermon, but we can see some of Satan's evolution in the Temptation story. When Matthew describes the character testing Jesus, he uses the word *diabolos*—devil, which has a sinister connotation. It is only when Jesus addresses the figure directly that the figure is named Satan, which doesn't necessarily have that more nefarious meaning in the early years of the first century. I think Jesus calling Peter "Satan," as we saw last week in Matthew 16, is evidence that, while the author of Matthew may have seen Jesus' testing in the wilderness as mean, Jesus may have seen it as a necessary proving of his mettle.

When Jesus says to Peter, "Get thou behind me, Satan!" he's reminding Peter, and also maybe reminding himself, that he can endure what lies ahead because he had already passed that test at the start of his ministry.

So, with those thoughts in mind, what is actually on the exam? What are the things that Jesus needs to prove to convince Satan that God's confidence in him is not misplaced? There are three things. They are the same three things in each Gospel account, although not necessarily in the same order.

The first test comes when Jesus has just finished a forty-day fast. Forty days without any food, whether you see forty as a symbolic number or a real number, is about the human limit before you risk serious damage and death. Jesus is about as hungry as it's possible to be. And Satan is tricky here. A fast—whether of food or something else—is a vow someone takes for a spiritual purpose. Satan does not try to get Jesus to break his vow. He knows better. Satan is not suggesting food at day 38. The fast is over. Jesus has kept his fast and he is now perfectly free to eat.

But Jesus didn't do his fast at the Whole Foods deli. He's out in the wilderness of Judea where there aren't so much as berries on bushes to eat. So, Satan says, "Hey, you're the Son of God—you can do miracles. Turning rocks into bread should not be an issue. You're exhausted and hungry and you still have a way to go to find food. Just make some bread here out of these rocks." On its face, that doesn't seem like it should be a problem.

Jesus responds with a quote from Deuteronomy 8:3. Who is Jesus quoting? Moses. And what is the context there in Deuteronomy? Moses is prepping the Israelites for entry into the Promised Land by reminding them of how God has taken care of their physical needs in the wilderness, specifically by providing food. Deuteronomy 8:2-3 reads: "²Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. ³He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."

The test for Jesus, as it was for the Israelites, is whether physical hardship will break his trust in God's care and provision. When Paul describes the "mind of Christ" in Philippians 2, he writes that Jesus "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." This first test is whether Jesus would exploit his ability to do miracles to meet his own physical needs. Nope. He will suffer the hunger, just as any ordinary human has to do, and trust God to provide, just as he would ask his followers to do. To use the power of God to make his own life easier would be, basically, cheating. If a regular person couldn't do it, neither would he, or the entire sojourn of Israel in the desert meant nothing.

Test two is a twist on the same concept. This whole scene is a series of visions and now they're suddenly up on the highest precipice of the temple in Jerusalem. "Well, if God is going to provide for you and you need to prove that to your followers, throw yourself off the top of the Temple! You like looking at Bible passages, so here's one for you. Psalm 91:11-12. Look—the whole Psalm is about all the ways God will protect you, including having angels catch you if you fall."

Jesus is up for Bible Bingo and responds with Moses again in Deuteronomy 6:16, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Jesus doesn't dispute the claim of protection in Psalm 91, but he succinctly points out that putting yourself in danger to make a show out of God's protection is a gross misunderstanding and abuse of God's care. If your child did such a thing just to prove to the world that you would be there for the catch, I'm guessing that catch would only be the beginning of woes for that child.

While I can see Jesus giving Satan the side-eye on this one, this test will not be as easy to sort out when Jesus has to face it in real life. There will come a day when Jesus will have to ask himself whether allowing himself to be arrested and crucified without so much as a word in his defense, is following God's will or putting God to the test.

Those around Jesus as he is staked into the ground are taunting him with this very thing. Come down from there if you're the son of God. Hmph...he saved others, but himself he cannot save. As he hung there to die, did the words of God's protection from harm in Psalm 91 ring in his ears? Did he wonder why God was not catching him? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," Jesus said as he was dying, quoting Psalm 22. This test, I think, was much easier in the exam than in the real-life application.

Then, finally, the third test finds Jesus and Satan on a very high mountain. Like Moses on Mt. Nebo, Jesus could see a long way. Satan gives him a vision of all the kingdoms of the earth from up there. If Jesus will just worship Satan, Jesus could rule the whole world. Now. This is the short-cut temptation.

"Okay, Jesus, you have proven you know the difference between trusting God and testing God. So why go through hardship at all? And why make your followers go through hardship? You're fit to lead, so lead. I'll give you all the kingdoms of the earth right now and you can just rule as you see fit. God dragged Israel through poisonous snakes and the hunger and thirst of the desert for 40 years and then Moses couldn't even enter the land flowing with milk and honey. God has just dragged you through forty tough days out here. Your trust is admirable, but you've backed the wrong horse. The promised land is yours for the taking right now if you back me instead."

Guess who Jesus quotes in his rebuttal to this last offer. That's right. Moses. Just a few verses up from the last one. Deuteronomy 6:13. The full verse reads, "The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear." This is just a few verses down from the central proclamation in all Judaism, which comes in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, "'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

What Satan brings to Jesus in this story is a summary version of all the tests Moses predicted would face the Israelites when they entered the Promised Land and encountered the other nations who lived there. And Jesus responded to Satan's presentation each time with the same advice that Moses gave the Israelites about how to meet those tests when they came. The faith has not changed; God has not changed; the basic challenges of the spiritual life have not changed since the days of Moses.

Once you leave the book of Deuteronomy; once Moses is buried in the land of Moab and Joshua leads the people in, the entire rest of the Old Testament is the story of Israel's attempts to pass those basic tests: Can you still trust God when you are physically, emotionally, and spiritually depleted? Can you stay humble and not turn God's protection into some kind of show of how special you are? Can you keep even the first of the Ten Commandments to have no other gods before the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Israel's test results were mixed. So were the results in the churches started by Paul, Peter, and others. All of human history, including the personal histories of everyone in this room, including me, has mixed results when we are faced with those same tests.

Jesus gets, and passes, the first version of those tests at the very start of his ministry. God may be well-pleased with him, but can he prove that he knows the Law of Moses and can practice it when physically weak and exhausted? The accuser would like to know. And God will allow that test, because, as hard as it is, what is coming at the end of three years will be much harder, and everything will rest on him succeeding. When the voice from heaven repeats the words from Jesus' baptism on the Mount of Transfiguration, right after Jesus has compared Peter to Satan, it's a signal that the test has come again, and this time it's not theoretical. This time it's not going to be a vision.

When Satan leaves Jesus in the wilderness, the angels come and minister to Jesus. His trust in God was not misplaced. But the very next verse tells us what has been happening outside the wilderness in the forty days since Jesus' cousin John baptized him in the River Jordan. "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee." And so, it begins. Amen.