

Temptations & Teachings

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Preaching on:
Matthew 4:1–11

Well, welcome everybody to the season of Lent, the journey of Lent. As you all remember, the season of Lent is a special one in the Christian tradition where more than in any other season of the Christian calendar, we're asked to live differently, to bracket out these six weeks of our lives as a sacred time through fasting, self-denial, prayer, and spiritual struggle and transformation. Lent is a spiritual journey that each one of us is asked to undertake with God.

Now, every first Sunday of Lent the lectionary turns us towards the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, which appropriately is also the story of fasting, self-denial, prayer, and spiritual struggle and transformation. Now, it is very tempting to think that the specific details of Jesus' struggle out there in the desert don't really have anything to do with you or with me with our spiritual journeys—this seems like a cosmic battle between the Son of God and the devil, it has nothing to do with us mere

mortals. Could it? We're just spectators here. We should watch in reverent awe. But that ignores the fact that Jesus uses Satan's three temptations as an opportunity to offer us three little teachings. And I think that these teachings are not just rebuttals to Satan in these specific circumstances, they're universal guideposts that apply to every person's spiritual journey. So we're going to take a look at these three teachings from Jesus and see if they have anything to offer our spiritual journeys over the next six weeks.

Now, as it all starts off, Jesus has been fasting for 40 days and he's very, very hungry. And Satan says, oh, perfect opportunity. And Satan shows up and he says, well, there's nothing to eat around here. But man, there sure are a lot of rocks. So why don't you go ahead and turn some of those rocks into bread and then you can finally have something to eat. Now I understand, I think a little bit of what Jesus was going through there, because every time I walk into my own kitchen, there's a little devil that appears on this shoulder and just starts saying, eat the bread. Go for the bread. It's the bread you want. Don't worry, you'll find time to work out later. It's gonna be fine. When the kids are taking a nap, you'll go for a jog, eat the bread, <laugh>. But this is not actually really about eating bread. Now, this is actually about Jesus finding an opportunity to offer us the most fundamental teaching to any spiritual journey. And until you've had this realization, I think it's actually really difficult to even be aware that you're on a spiritual journey at all, and that teaching is just simply this: Human beings do not live by bread alone.

In other words, you are a really weird contradiction, human being. You're this physical being living in a material world, and yet you are called to have a spiritual orientation to this life. Well, that's a difficult thing to do. Another way of saying it would be to say that you've got a soul locked away inside all that flesh. And that soul needs to be acknowledged, that soul needs to be cared for, that soul needs to be expressed. Now, there are some people, and maybe some of us, some of you sitting in this room who don't really believe in the soul. You know, some folks truly believe that this is just a physical universe and that we are just, you know, made up of atoms and chemistry and cells and neurons and everything that's happening inside of us is explicable by mathematics and physics and chemistry and biology and science, and that there is no supernatural soul that comes into the mix of anything at all. And sometimes we come to believe that this is the sort of antithetical position to the Christian position. It's certainly different than the Christian position. It's certainly a position to dialogue with and maybe to disagree with. But it is actually not the antithetical position to the Christian position.

The antithetical position is another one that's becoming very, very familiar in this world, in this culture of ours. And it's not that we don't have a soul. It's that the universe and the life that we are leading have no meaning. It doesn't mean anything at all. That is the antithetical position to Jesus saying that we do not live by bread alone. When he says that Jesus means that our deepest hunger, our deepest hunger in this life will never be a physical hunger. It's always going to be the hunger for meaning, the hunger to express our soul, to care for our soul, to understand our relationship to this world as one of a relationship, not of body to body, material to material, but a relationship of soul to soul, of I, to thou not I to it, to believe that it really matters how we behave, how we live, and how we treat one another. I

believe that the need for meaning is so fundamental to being a human being, that it really can't be escaped at all. To the extent that I believe that people who believe that there is no meaning in life find meaning in their nihilism, right? They begin to orient their lives to this position. "Well, I don't believe in anything has any meaning." They orient their lives to that position, and then they try to behave in accordance to that belief that everything is just chaos and it doesn't mean anything. Well, guess what that is called? That's called meaning making. You can't escape from your human need to be a spiritual being who connects to the deepest meaning (or non-meaning) of life. I contend that it's far better to make meaning out of the certainty that meaning itself is the most important factor in life. And that's where God comes into our lives.

Now, when you believe that material wellbeing (bread alone) is the most important factor in your life, you lose your freedom. You're not free anymore. Once you believe that the physical world and your physical comfort is the most important thing, you lose your spirit. You lose everything that makes you interesting as a human being. So much so that this is even true, I think, in capitalism. Now, you'd think that capitalism is only supposed to be about the bottom line, about the profit, about the material world, but no, no, because capitalism is a human enterprise. So even economics cannot live by bread alone because it's really about people. Anything we touch becomes infused with spirit. And in business, if you spend all your time and energy limiting your liabilities, you end up losing your entrepreneurial spirit. Safety is very important. But safety that limits progress and freedom instead of enhancing progress and freedom is a bread alone existence that can never satisfy our deepest hunger.

So once you've realized that you do not live by bread alone, no, you are a physical being in a material world on a spiritual journey, that's wonderful you've made that realization. Now, don't let it go to your head, Jesus says. And Jesus in the next lesson, offers us a safety tip, a warning about a very seductive, wrong turn that has derailed many a spiritual journey. The devil brings Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. This was the highest point in Jerusalem, and may well have been the tallest building in the world. It is extremely high up there. And he says, well, you know, you're the son of God and all, and God loves you, and God cares for you. God created you. God has called you. God has blessed you. Isn't all this true? (And isn't it all this true about us? Doesn't God love us? Doesn't God care about us? Isn't God blessing our lives?) And if that's true about you, Jesus, well, why don't you just throw yourself down? Because isn't God watching over you? Isn't God protecting you? Will God ever let anything happen to you? Isn't everything going to be all right for you? And that is, unfortunately, an attitude that can lead to spiritual disaster, as Jesus is quick to point out.

In the Zen tradition, on the road to enlightenment there is a fork that must be passed through which is very seductive. And it can derail the path to enlightenment. And what happens is, after you have sat down in meditation for a long, long time and practiced for many, many years, you may come to a point where you realize that you have supernatural powers, that you are in fact a spiritual being in the physical world, and that you might actually believe that you can jump up and fly through the air and do incredible feats with your body. And there are all kinds of stories in the Zen tradition of monks actually

achieving these incredible superhuman feats because of the way that their minds have been transformed. And you would think, well, that's surely a sign. You're on the right path. But if you see a Zen master in art, he's always carrying around a giant stick. That's because the Zen Master's job, when he sees this happening, is to go up to that monk who's experiencing supernatural powers and to hit him with a stick right in the head, bam! And to say, no! You're off the true path.

Many of us struggle in Christianity with this call to be humble, to be meek, to turn the other cheeks, not to resist evil with evil, to pray for our enemies. It's so difficult. You know, why, why can't we be big? Why can't we be more? Why do we always feel like the tradition is asking us to small ourselves? But context is everything here. When these teachings about self-denial come to us in the belief that we aren't anything, that we're no good, that we're just physical beings, and that we're just totally awful and depraved sinners, it can feel like Christian tradition is just piling it onto us when it's saying, "And you ought to always behave in a humble way. But when these teachings come to us in the proper Christian context of knowing that we are made, called, chosen, saved, and loved by God, that we are good, that we have a mission, that we were made for meaning and making a difference in the world, that each of us is on a spiritual journey of personal sacrifice that will lead to God's glory, then it makes a lot more sense. And when we're at one of those pinnacle moments in life, moments in which we feel full of the Spirit and full of God's blessing and God's movement through our body, and when we are feeling powerful and called and justified and absolutely right, we will not act (hopefully) as if we have supernatural powers. We will not act, hopefully, as if we're infallible or invincible or high and mighty or better than anyone else. We will continue to behave as Jesus always instructed us to behave: as a servant, not as a superhero, not as a pharaoh, not as an angelic being, but as a human being, a mere mortal, a humble, humble human being, a servant to God and to neighbor. That's who we're called to be.

The most shocking version of these pinnacle moments going bad (the Kool-Aid drinking cults, the religious leaders who seduced their followers, or sending your church out to protest some random gay person's funeral just because of the fact that they're gay) these are not temptations that most of us in this room have fallen into. But all of us have had the experience of venturing to believe that we are better than other people, more special than other people, more loved than other people. And we believe that we can see it. We can see it in the things that we have achieved, and we can see it in the things that they have not achieved. That others are suffering is surely a sign that they're bad and being punished. And that I'm not suffering is because I'm good and I'm on a spiritual journey. It goes so far that when a disaster strikes and the building collapses all around us, and we're pulled from the rubble, and we're asked, what saved you? We say, well, God saved me. Well, what about the other people who were in the building and who weren't pulled out alive? Did God just forget about them?

It's very seductive to think this way, very seductive to believe that we're somehow more chosen, better, safer than other people. When we start to think like this and make decisions based on this wrong belief, we're always destined for a fall. It only leads to bad things. And so, Jesus' second lesson to us

is to continue to be meek, continue to be mild, and live as though we were human—a physical being with a spiritual orientation to life who serves, rather than thinking that you're a superhero.

And this leads us to our conclusion. So in the first step, we come to realize that there is meaning and purpose in our lives. We do not live by bread alone. In the second step, we stay humble about this calling. We do not lord it over other people. We don't put God to the test by demanding favors from God or special blessings from God. And in the final step, we realize that if there is meaning and purpose in our lives, if that's true, and if we at our very best are (just like Jesus) merely servants to our calling and to our neighbors, then the source of our meaning is the Ultimate Meaning of the universe, and the ground of our being is Being itself. We worship God and we serve God alone. Now, this is far easier said than done. Most of us (the guy standing up here talking included) worship and serve some other part of this world or of our culture or our political system or our own desires, right? We might worship money. We might serve the corporation we work for, even though we don't believe in all of that corporation's values. We might worship the latest political savior to come along on the right or on the left. We might serve our addiction to drugs or to power or to screens, or to a hundred other things. We've all got something. We've all got something that's standing in the way between us and God, something that we orient ourselves to rather than to God. All of us have put something in the way. All of us have let something get in the middle. But the spiritual journey through this life, and through this season of Lent, is to let all of that other stuff go, to have a totally spiritual orientation to this material world and to serve its brokenness without thought to our glorification or our reward. We are here to worship God and (as Jesus teaches us) to serve God by serving our neighbors, and that is all.

May these teachings and this perspective bless our spiritual journey as this Lent.