

TEMPTED

Matthew 4:1-17

EPIPHANY 4

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How strange it is for us to hear the reading of the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness, not on the first Sunday in Lent, but on the third Sunday after Epiphany.

Because we are following the Narrative Lectionary's weekly readings from the Gospel according to Matthew in sequence, the temptation of Jesus immediately follows the baptism of Jesus.

We read about the baptism a week late, due to a shutdown caused, not by Congress, but a snowstorm.

We are simply informed at the outset of today's passage,

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil" (4:1).

At His baptism by John in the Jordan river, it was this same Spirit that descended upon Jesus, investing Him with the Messianic office for which He had been born and prepared for.

In essence, in Jesus' baptism, we have the anointing by the Spirit from above, God's voice of acclamation and approval, all serving as a coronation of a new king.

He would be a King of the Jews, unlike both past and present rulers, who will both obediently follow the will of God and serve God's people.

The question at hand for the reader of Matthew's Gospel is whether his promise and potential would be realized.

Is this Jesus the true Messiah or another pretender to the throne?

For Matthew, the next forty days of temptation and testing in the wilderness would assure his readers and listeners that Jesus is really the "Son of God."

After narrating Jesus' birth and baptism, Matthew concludes his introduction to Jesus' identity and His spiritual preparation for His public ministry and the fulfillment of God's mission of salvation with the wilderness temptations.

The temptation story continues the comparisons between Israel and Jesus, emphasizing how Jesus remains utterly loyal to God during His wilderness ordeal.

This theme, or motif, emerges through Jesus' three scriptural citations from Deuteronomy,

that spoke of Israel's lack of obedience to Yahweh during their 40 year wilderness journey.

Matthew holds Jesus up as the One who is faithful and true to God's promises.

Later, in the Passion Narrative, Matthew will highlight Jesus' trust in God at Gethsemane, when He resists the temptation to abandon God's mission for Him through the cross.

So, the final event that launches Jesus' messianic ministry will be His testing in the wilderness east of the Jordan.

It can also be said here that in the ancient world, all the sons of kings had to be tested to prove their fitness as the rightful successor to the throne.

It must also be duly noted that the heroes of the Old Testament were put to the test before their ministries as well.

Abraham, Jacob, and Daniel, for example, were also faced with tests that served to strengthen their spiritual resolve to put their trust fully in God.

Jesus, already attested to be the Son of David and the Son of Abraham, will prove Himself to be God's chosen Messiah — **“the true Israel, the Son of God, who will usher in the Kingdom of heaven.”**

The Tempter approaches Jesus with two temptations aimed at questioning His identity.

“If You are the Son of God . . .”

What is our identity?

Who are we?

These are questions we ask, or, as in Jesus' case, are asked when faced with difficult choices.

As Christians — a community of believers, or even as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America itself — these questions are becoming even more significant by our words and actions.

Our identity is more than a collection of individual characteristics and personality traits.

In other words, what does it mean to us that we are Christians, especially at a time when Christians around the world are being persecuted by governments or those in power?

And in our Western culture, Christians are being vilified as being judgmental, hateful, and bigoted.

Our identity is always challenged most significantly when life is hard.

Today's text states in verse two that Jesus is famished when He is tempted.

We may find ourselves faced with temptation when we are stressed, overly tired, anxious, or sick.

It was in the wilderness that the Israelites struggled to identify themselves as people of God, creating a golden calf to worship in the place of God (Exodus 32).

Congregations like ours are tested when they face financial problems, internal disagreements, or external threats.

During these times, it is the hardest for us to be the people God has called us to be.

The first two of Jesus' temptations address the issue of His identity directly.

“If You are the Son of God,” the Devil challenges.

The implication is that, if Jesus cannot prove His identity as the Son of God, He will succumb to the Devil's wishes.

In other words, He will abandon His identity and the mission God has chosen for Him.

Through all three temptations, Jesus remains true to His identity and character as God's Son.

The Devil first tempts Jesus to alleviate His own hunger with divine power.

“If You are the Son of God,” he says to the ‘famished’ Jesus, ***“command these stones to become bread”*** (v. 3).

How ironic that the Jesus, who later will miraculously feed thousands of others, does not choose to feed Himself.

Jesus decides not to avoid human pain and suffering, but to be more fully one of us.

Next, the Devil challenges Jesus to test God's faithfulness by throwing Himself down from

“the pinnacle of the temple” (v. 5).

Again, the Devil prefaces his next temptation with the phrase,

“If You are the Son of God. . .”

This time, the Devil again attempts to misconstrue scripture to bolster his temptation for Jesus to jump from the temple's western corner.

Psalms 91 promises the one who takes refuge in God will have God's angelic protection against harm.

While Jesus knows the truth of this psalm's promise, He refuses to test God's faithfulness by asking for grand demonstrations.

The wonderful irony of this test is that, while Jesus refuses the temptation to seek angelic protection and assistance, the temptations in the wilderness conclude with angels coming to attend to Him (4:11).

In the final test, the Devil offers Jesus authority over

“The kingdoms of this world” if ***“You will fall down and worship me”*** (vv. 8-9).

Jesus must decide whom He will serve.

As the folk-rock star and laureate poet, Bob Dylan, puts it, ***“everybody's got to serve somebody sometime.”***

Will Jesus serve God or will He serve evil?

Will He abandon His identity and mission?

Will He choose a life of power, or will He choose the life of a servant?

Just who is this Son of God going to be?

We also must choose what it means to be a son or daughter of God.

Who and whose are we going to be?

Will we respond with apathy and impatience toward those who are poor, hungry, and struggling?

Will we take time to listen to someone who is hurting when we are in a hurry?

When we are financially struggling, will we continue to give charitably?

Will we be the giving, honest, and loving people we were called to be?

Who are we going to be as a congregation?

How will we allocate our resources?

Will we fully support our benevolence giving to our New Jersey Synod and to the larger Church?

How will we treat newcomers who seek to worship with us?

In addition to resisting the temptation to do harm, we can also live into our Christian identity through positive actions.

Through our Food Pantry, we have both the identity and reputation as a faith community who welcomes strangers and treats them graciously and generously.

Through our willingness to maintain a safe and well-maintained building, many self-help groups and community organizations meet and help others here.

Through your generous giving, we are able to have a staff who work hard for this congregation.

There is a temptation for us to act out of guilt to create ministries and to expand our church without the proper people and financial resources.

I would love to grow a children and youth ministry, but, without the help of others, this is not going to happen.

Our staff needs your leadership and help.

These tests and challenges are not new.

Beloved people of God,
in the remaining chapters of Matthew, we will read many stories that echo these temptations.

Jesus will constantly confront such temptations from His contemporaries.

They will test His divine Sonship by demanding a sign from heaven.

They will test Him with difficult legal questions on which even the Mosaic Law gives no definite answer.

They will do so to trap, accuse, or slander Him, and, thereby, tempt Him to show off the power of His divine Sonship.

The temptations will reach a climax when, on the cross, we will hear a nearly verbatim repetition of the Devil's words.

Those who pass by, deride Jesus:

“If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (27:40).

In addition to today's text, I included the following passage after Jesus' temptations, and upon hearing the news of John the Baptist's arrest.

Jesus begins His public ministry and God's mission by branching out into new territory with the words of the Baptist,

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.”

While this foreshadows the expansion of God's Kingdom to include Jews and Gentiles as well, it is also an important reminder for the Church that God speaks in places that surprise us.

AMEN