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Matthew 4:1-11

THE GREATEST PRAYER, PART VI: LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

The great folklorist Joseph Campbell once said, "Myth is much more important and true than history. History is just journalism and you know how reliable that is." We have this tendency in our culture to think that myth means "not true" when, in fact, it means more true. There are historical events and then there are myths that reveal the truth of those events, our connection to all of history in that the mythic parts are the ones that keep happening over and over again.

In The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer, John Dominic Crossan opens his chapter on temptation by describing a scene that occurred in 4BCE in the city of Sepphoris, the capital of the Judean territory. There a rebellion has grown up against the Roman Empire and a rebel leader named Judas has seized weapons and is making some headway. Rome responds the way that empires respond. They march with force. Rome likes to keep its forces on the edges of the empire, defending against invasion and ready to expand the boundaries if the opportunity arises. So if they have to send troops into the interior, they want to send a clear message. Rome marches to Sepphoris in 4BCE and then again to Jerusalem in 66CE and once more in 132CE. Every couple of generations they come to remind the Judeans of their place in the hierarchy.

In 4 BCE, the Roman forces level Sepphoris, reducing its inhabitants to slavery and burning the city to the ground. If you leave Sepphoris, head across the valley floor for a few miles and cross over a ridge you come to the village of Nazareth. There the inhabitants would likely have been witness to not only the sacking of Sepphoris, but would likely have been visited themselves. Rome does not mess around. They do not want to come back and they want to be sure that the general populace gets the message – do not mess with us! It is likely that Jesus, born a decade or so later, would have been witness to these stories, that the "year the Romans came" would have still been a decisive scar on the psyches of that region.

We have such a date and event lodged into our psyches...in fact, we have two. The first event is fast approaching another anniversary - April 19th, 1995. On that day our innocence was shattered, many lives were lost or forever scarred, and we can now mark the time from that point forward. Then, on a more national scale, we have September 11, 2001. And that marks a shift in our collective

consciousness that has produced 2 wars, a recession, and the rise of a fear-based agenda on a legislative and political level. These cataclysmic events linger, as I imagine that the leveling of Sepphoris did for the people of that area...even without the benefit of visual imagery ready at a moment's notice. We watched the towers burn and collapse. They heard stories of the "year of the Romans". The effect is the same. We could not have clearer pictures – more unobstructed examples of the way of empire and the way of God before us. Here, on this week before Easter we can see God's path and empire's path laid out before us. Hopefully we see ourselves as being on God's path, but the temptation of empire is always there, for our culture embraces one path while we profess another. And, of course, the crucial detail is that those of us in this room are not on the receiving end of empire...we are empire.

But the devil is in the details...or in this case, the devil is in the temptations. We tend to think of temptations as having more to do with food or sex than with ideological foundations. But this story of Jesus in the desert gives us a clear example of what is meant by temptations, and it is something far beyond momentary gratification. It is centered in how we see the world and what kinds of activities we will engage in. The devil, which is more accurately translated as the “adversary” comes to Jesus to tempt him yes, but how? To what is the adversary tempting Jesus?

First off you need to be aware that the earlier gospel chronologically, the Gospel according to Mark, has no such event. Jesus goes into the desert and is tempted, but no specifics are given. Matthew feels a need to elaborate on the temptations, and Luke follows suit. Jesus' tests come in the forms of turning stone to bread, a great temptation for a man coming off a 40 day fast, “proving” God's power and finally the temptation to use power to control the earth – at least power in the way that the adversary sees it. Crossan believes this passage to be critical in our understanding of what we are asking in the Lord's Prayer, for “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” is about more than just keeping on our diet or avoiding a metaphorical devil who entices us to do “bad” things. This prayer is about our orientation and what exactly we believe about the character of God.

Crossan points out that if we believe Jesus to be the “incarnation” of God, the best example of what God is like, then we must be interested in what he would do or, more specifically to this issue, not do. It is, as Crossan says, “precisely as 'Son of *God*'” that Jesus is tempted to do, but refuses to do, certain things. And in the detailed texts from Matthew and Luke, these temptations revolve around power. Both authors assume Jesus' authority and status as the Messiah, or as the “Son of God” or at least as God's representative on earth. This is why the adversary begins his temptations with, “if you are the son of God, then...”.

The adversary sees power as something to be exploited for personal comfort, gain or the control of others. He sees power as something that he possesses and wields, not something that is granted him by God. So his temptations are not necessarily about power, but about what kinds of power we use and to what ends?

First the adversary tempts a hungry Jesus to use his power to turn stones into bread, an enticement that Jesus turns away saying, "We do not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." In other words, I will not use my power for personal gain, but will instead

adhere to God's path which tells us that power is to be given away.

Then the adversary takes Jesus to a high cliff and tells him to throw himself off, quoting a Psalm that tells us that God's angels will carry us in their arms if we trip over a stone. But Jesus challenges this with a quote from Deuteronomy, "Do not put the LORD your God to the test." In other words, God does not operate from proof, but from trust.

Finally the adversary tempts Jesus with the most crucial test yet. He takes him to a very high mountain and tells him that every kingdom of the world, in all of their splendor, will be given to him if he will do him homage. And Jesus says - love the LORD your God and serve God alone. In other words, you may gain the world through violence and injustice, or you may create the reign of God with non-violence and justice.

In two of these cases, the adversary hits Jesus with scriptural references that he quotes and presents literally. Jesus refuses to take the literalism bait and instead offers figurative speech and metaphorical answers. And when the adversary presents the final temptation, the one that Matthew wants us to think is the most difficult, we see the true power of Jesus. Jesus is our model of both divinity and humanity because when he is presented with power, he gives it away. When he is promised certainty, he reacts with trust. And when he is offered ultimate control and authority, he reminds the adversary that the job is already filled. We look to Jesus as our model because he offers us the most complete example of the character of God and the example of humanity. He is on the "inside", the one who knows best what those temptations really mean, and what they would cost. So if we think of Jesus in this way, or even if we simply think of him as having a profoundly important philosophy, it stands to reason that we would seek in our own lives to do what Jesus does and as importantly, *not* do what he doesn't do.

Jesus is led into the desert by the Holy Spirit, the text says. So too the Lord's Prayer asks God not to lead us into temptation, but to deliver us from evil. It is a very human prayer. Yet temptation is the very thing that strengthens our faith, that gives us endurance.

The essence of this model is shown for us in our Palm Sunday scene, which looks something like this: Jesus is riding a donkey, people are surrounding him marching into Jerusalem carrying palm fronds along the dusty road. It is a processional for this remarkable new ruler, the one who comes not to simply take over the reins of power but to announce a whole new way of life.

The other side of the story is taking place on the other side of Jerusalem where Pontius Pilate, the Roman designate for the area, arrives from his Mediterranean Sea villa to Jerusalem for the High Holy Days of Passover...not for the festivities per say, mostly to keep an eye on these Israelites with their propensity for rebellion. His procession looks a lot different. He arrives with the full might of Roman military power on display. Garrisons of armored soldiers, full Calvary units, banners and trumpets and the artificial cheers of a crowd smart enough to act happy about his arrival, and the polite applause of the local power brokers, who know from whence their power comes.

These two scenes are being played out on each side of Jerusalem. The two “kings” marching into the capital with very different crowds surrounding them. Those scenes portray, in part, the two sides of the empire - those who live on the top of empire and those who live under it. Think of this as you imagine Jesus marching into one side of Jerusalem, a poor carpenter from Nazareth leading a group of subsistence peasants into the capital city for Passover. The image of a new way of life being set against the 'Way of Empire', the "reign of God" against the "reign of Caesar". And we know where this test is leading for Jesus. This week, the mythical week, will portray that struggle all over again. Jesus, full of strength and conviction at some times and doubt and struggle at other times, will face his ultimate temptations.

In his book, The Last Temptation of Christ, Nikos Kazantzakis portrayed a Jesus who was far too human for many people. The protests of this book and the subsequent movie were vocal and large. I have always thought there to be some theology and psychology at work in those protests. If Jesus is “God in flesh” and without sin or doubt, then his sacrifice for my sins is a transactional event, something that I can more readily accept. It is like a gift from God. But if Jesus is human, just like us, then we are faced with making similar choices, with facing the same decisions. Maybe in that sense the “Passion of the Christ” is easier – Jesus being bloodied, bruised and beaten for us so that we may have some promised eternal life, because this one is just too hard to make holy.

But that is not the message of Easter. Easter does not solve the problem, it only gives us the tools with which to work. Walter Wink, the renowned theologian and *the* voice, in my opinion, on this issue of power, reminds us that we all deal with the “Powers That Be”. They are both the forces that make things work and provide structure and do things that we cannot do alone, and the sources of unmitigated evils. A corporation that provides many jobs and produces needed products also dumps known carcinogens in the local water supply. A rebel leader overturns a corrupt government only to later give into the same corruptions. A legislature protects the rights of some, while actively trampling on the rights of others.

So too is Jesus led into the desert to be tempted to use his power in the same old fashion and therefore end up with the world's answer to what power means. His refusal to cooperate with that plan, which culminates with Palm Sunday and the long week of his mock trial and execution, narrates the character of Jesus, but it also narrates the character of God.

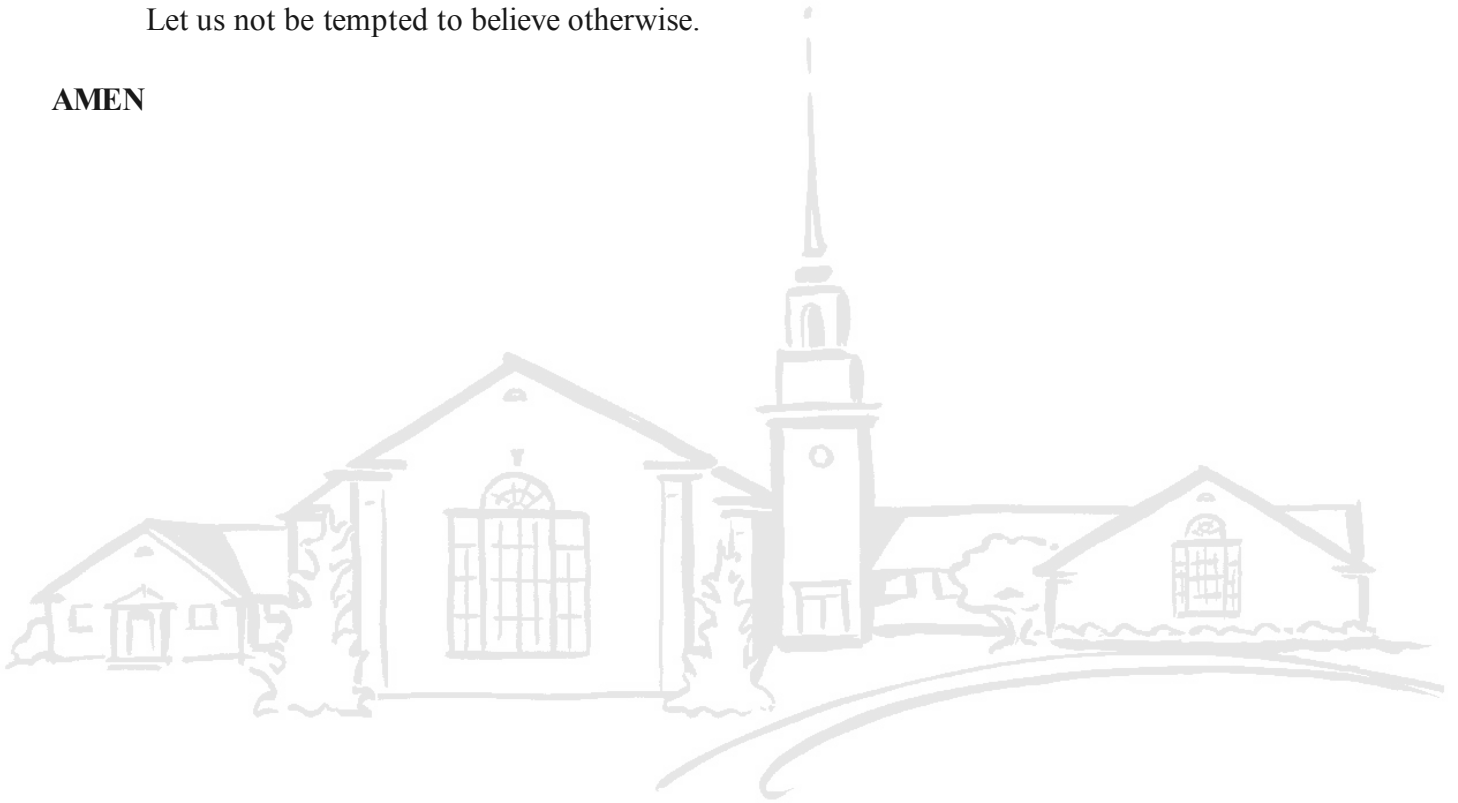
This week our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate Passover, the ritual recognition of the story of the Exodus. Contained in that mythic story is the Pharaoh, Moses, the Israelites, and many other characters – all of whom are far more complex than a first glance says. We even get my most favorite description of God in this story. God, who comes to Moses as a burning bush, answers Moses' call for identification, his reach for a handle on this divinity, with this answer - “I am who I shall be”. God is, in this mythic story, the very power of becoming, the essence of what is possible.

The way of empire is set on what is, and the structure and authority that controls what is. But the path of God centers on what is possible. The Israelites freed from bondage, the 40 years in the wilderness that shape them into a people, the spiraling history of test after test for a faith that rests

itself on always becoming. That is the foundation for Jesus arriving and telling his disciples that God is not static and that we always have choices, that the promise of the kingdom of heaven is for us right here and now and that the action of love is always stronger than the bitterness of hatred. It is an Easter promise.

Let us not be tempted to believe otherwise.

AMEN



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