

# Matthew 4:1-11

## The Temptation of Jesus

<sup>4</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” <sup>4</sup> But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> saying to him, “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.’”

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup> and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’”

<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

**March 5, 2017**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

**“Alone”**

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Alone. Jesus had to do this alone. The Spirit led him out there, and then left him in the wilderness alone. This is dry and barren desert alone. Hungry alone. Exposed alone. Alone with his thoughts. Alone in his prayers. And his only companion becomes the tempter who enters his mind precisely when he is famished, hurting, and weary of this experience.

There are, however, different kinds of being alone. Solitude is different from loneliness. There is choosing to be alone and there's the kind of alone that gets chosen for you. You can be alone in your own mind even in a crowd, or be crowded by obsessive thoughts even in a quiet place by yourself. You may feel all alone in your way of interpreting the world. And no matter how hard any of us tries, or how good any of us gets at understanding others, there is the human realization that we cannot fuse with or become another person – in mind, spirit, or body – so all we can ever be is our own inner self. That may be freeing, or that could be terrifying. Alone. Like Jesus, we each live our singular human life, in many ways, alone.

However, most Sundays you wouldn't know that from coming to church and hearing the usual sermon or songs or readings. The church has built itself on community, and is scared to pieces about telling these stories of unbelievable and indescribable transformation that happen alone. It doesn't do so well for business to have people aware that the Spirit is still speaking to them, personally. We want to control what gets said and heard and taught about the faith. It also doesn't do well for business to have people off on a wilderness experience when we need them

in their usual seats and putting their usual amount in the collection plate. We judge ourselves too often by how many and how much – rather than asking the deep questions about transformation and the challenging leadings of the Spirit. That gets messy. It also gets painful. And it has been and probably always will be the conversation happening on the fringes of the church rather than at its center.

In his book, “The Way of the Heart,” Henri Nowen defines solitude as “a place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born, the place where the emergence of the new man and the new woman occurs.” So if the heart of our religious faith is based in conversion, and the evidence of our conversion is an overwhelming sense of transformation, I dare say that we don’t do much talking about this kind of life-changing experience that happens in a most uncomfortable way – dying to the old and being recreated in the new. We would rather have our conversion experiences on the tamer side of life where people complete a new member class and join the church with the collective recitation of the Apostles’ Creed. We, the church, could do more, I think, to acknowledge that nudging, leading, or pushing nature of the Spirit to drive us from our comfortable communal habitats and out into the desert. We are not as able to hear the inner voice when we are surrounded by the clamoring of external voices. You know those voices, the ones that tell us what to do, and who to be, and how to live, and where we are needed next. Now, I admit that those voices are important too. We live MOST of our lives in communities – whether those communities happen for work, or family, or church, or town, or knitting circle. We are, in part, defined by our family and friends and cohorts. But that’s not all that defines us, and it may not be enough.

When we are constantly adjusting ourselves to the community and its morals and values and culture, we may miss some important things about really being alone. The courage that Jesus

gained by his time alone in the wilderness set him up for the evil he would be up against throughout his whole ministry. Honestly, I'm not sure how he did it. When he was starving from his fast, he refused the sustenance of bread. When he was lonely from his time apart, he refused the care and dependability of God's angels. When he knew himself to be powerless, he refused to let the devil make him the most powerful King of the World. How did he do it? How did he generate that kind of resistance to the tempter's voice inside his head? How will we find the courage to be alone and the resistance to stand up to all those empty promises to make our lives fuller, and easier, and better when those same promises threaten to take down others in the process?

Maybe we find this fortitude through the church that speaks in the name of Jesus. I have been in the center of the church all my life. I love the fellowship, the stories, the generosity, and I have even come to love the ritual sameness of it all. I breathe deeply with the tradition that changes at only a sloth-like pace. It's more my speed, and that's who I am. Not that I hate all things new, I don't. But I want to know deep down that I have a place within the long history of the faith. It grounds me. It nurtures me. But when I am honest, I also must admit that at times, the center of the church has failed me. The center can become comfortable and tribal. I can become too ingrained with the desire to be with people "like me." That's when I need a hefty dose of feeling and being "alone." That's precisely when the Spirit grabs me by the sleeve and takes me somewhere I may not really want to go.

That's when it's important to journey from the center of the church all the way out to its outer fringes. The forgotten and neglected parts of our story have taught me deep and sometimes painful lessons about my faith. Those fringes - those alone times - are where conversion happens, are where transformation is almost inevitable. And it is important for those of us who find

comfort in the center to remember that the Church universal is much bigger than the public face of Christianity. Ultimately what makes the church holy is that it is faithful enough to come face to face with the unholy truths and ugly realities of our world. What makes the church more than just a collection of denominations, and factions, and sub-groups is that we proclaim a universal love that comes through this person known in flesh as Jesus and in spirit as the living Christ.

Sometimes Christianity proclaims that we trust in or believe in Jesus alone. What we usually mean by that is that we are saying we have something on the people who don't quite see it the same way we do. But I dare to say that we trust in Jesus alone – because we believe in this experience, this walk he took alone. He was tried and tempted alone, so that in our experiences, we might not feel so alone. We might be able to see the similarities and draw from the strength of his stories. We tell the long story every Lent that Jesus resisted these powers so significantly that he would turn his face to Jerusalem and proclaim his resistance even to the point of a humiliating capital punishment that would be suggested from the very center of his own faith. It's chilling. And it is the story of the old life that becomes new in the process, and from beyond the grave. But perhaps we can learn something about being alone, together. We need each other's encouragement. We grow stronger by witnessing each other's courage. But most of all, we benefit from being with one another in love. That's what Jesus said was most important of all. If you're going to give your life, do so for your friends. Love your neighbors and even your enemies. Make the love of God primary in your life. That's how we get through. That's how we get through when we are, in fact, ALONE. Amen.