

Lent 1A 2023 Matthew 4:1-11 & Genesis 2-3

Two of the things I particularly like about the Lutheran Church are our liturgical traditions, some of which go all the way back to the first couple centuries of Christian worship, and our lectionary, which means that someone else picks the scripture that I preach about every week. But occasionally the liturgy and the lectionary meet in ways that, however well intended, can end up being less than helpful. So each year, just when we begin our traditional Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and works of charity, we read about Jesus' 40 days of temptation. If all we take away from this story is that Jesus prayed and fasted for a whole 40 days and nights, so we should be able to stick with reading that new devotional book for 10 minutes a day or leaving the chocolate on the shelf for six weeks, then we'll have missed the point of both Lent and the gospel. We can do better.

To locate ourselves in Matthew's story, remember that immediately before this Jesus was baptized by John, and immediately after this Jesus begins his public ministry. In case we ever think that our baptism is insurance against strife and struggle, the very first thing the Spirit does after Jesus is baptized is lead him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The voice from heaven proclaiming *This is my Son the Beloved* is still echoing as we hear the tempter repeat his challenge...*If you are the Son of God...* Jesus knows who he is. The devil knows who Jesus is. We know who Jesus is, because Matthew just told us. So there really is no question of Jesus' identity. The question is what that means, what Jesus will do in his role as God's Son. And here we see, he won't turn stones into bread, he won't throw himself off the temple, and he won't worship anyone but God, not for all the wealth and power in the world.

There's nothing wrong with Jesus being hungry after 40 days and wanting to eat some bread. But there would be something ungodly about violating the laws of nature for his own satisfaction, particularly as a trick to prove his identity. There is no need for him to throw himself off the temple to prove the angels will help him; as we read at the end of this passage, the angels show up anyway. And all the splendid kingdoms of the world already rightfully belong to God and therefore to Jesus, the Son of God—he doesn't need to worship Satan in order to get them. Jesus knows who he is and who God is. And because he is God's Son, he will act like God...and the God who so loved the world that he gave his Son doesn't take for selfish gain, coerce, or abuse power to prove a point.

Jesus easily passes the identity test that Adam and Eve fail, which in a way is the same temptation. This piece of our mythology in Genesis has been used to explain how sin entered the world through human disobedience, but there is already evil active in the world, evidenced by the serpent's deception. The serpent uses promises, *you will be like God*. But humans were *already like God*...because they were created in God's image. Adam and Eve—and, by the way, it's important to notice that they were together when this happened, lest one of them receive all the blame, as has traditionally happened—Adam and Eve—and, by the way, it's important to notice that the command about not eating from the tree was given to Adam, not Eve, who hadn't been created yet, lest one of them receive all the blame, as has traditionally happened—Adam and Eve—and, by the way, it's important to notice that this additional bit about not touching the fruit was never part of God's initial instruction, but must have been added by whomever passed this information to Eve, lest one of them receive all the blame, as has traditionally happened—but Adam and Eve's first sin is not eating the fruit; it's believing they have to make themselves like God, when they were already created in the image of God; it's trying to get for themselves what the serpent can't really promise them, making a deal for what God has already freely given them. They forgot who they were; Jesus remembered. But in both cases, the temptation was to reach out take for themselves what was already theirs, and what was not the tempter's to offer.

So today's stories are not cautionary tales to encourage us to stick with whatever Lenten disciplines we've chosen, lest we give into the temptation to skip a devotional practice or eat a chocolate bar. These stories are reminders that we are beloved children of God, created in the image of God, who is by nature generous, selfless, and powerful—and whose tactics are never coercive, unjust, or tyrannical. If we are engaging in Lenten disciplines, I hope we are not deceiving ourselves into thinking that we're making ourselves more faithful or more lovable to God; I hope they are helping us discover more and more how faithful and loving God is to us. The greatest temptation to overcome is believing anyone—enemy or friend, human or snake, and especially the voice in our own head—who tries to tell us that God doesn't already love us, who tries to sell us what God has already given us, or who tries to challenge us to become what God has already made us by acting in ways that God never would. *If we are children of God? We could be like God?* No, we *are* children of God, made in God's image. The end...and the beginning.