

## Matthew 4:1-11

### **If You Fall Down**

It begins so smoothly, so gently. It is a little tug toward something that we know is not good for us. We feel it in our hearts and even at times in our bodies. We think, "Oh, just this once" or "It is just a little thing, what can it hurt?" and then before you know it you are doing more things, letting other things slip without being addressed or with little to no more thought on the subject.

Maybe it is that little flirtation with another person or with fate, the one pill, the one more chocolate, the one more smoke. Maybe it is the one more story about the family member, friend or neighbour that does not build up but rather is juicy gossip and is intended as such, even when disguised as genuine care about another's well being.

Temptation is an insidious thing.

Today marks the first Sunday in Lent, and the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is the chosen scripture in the Revised Common Lectionary. A prescribed set of readings that many denominations and churches follow world wide.

Now a couple of things to set this story in perspective. The temptation that is described in the gospel of Matthew is the telling of a grand archetype of temptation. None of us are Jesus. This is a story that comes directly after Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River. A moment that Jesus shows his solidarity with humankind. His baptism is also a moment where Jesus is identified as God's son with the words, "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life." (Matthew 3:17)

The Jewish audience that Matthew writes to would have made immediate parallels between this story of the wilderness temptation and the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the desert after leaving their captivity and slavery in Egypt. Israel was also God's child, they were God's people, but they were not great at following God. Their temptations were many, from quick fixes to lures of a life that seemed easier, less treacherous. In short, we are like the people of Israel, wondering about from one thing to the next, tempted by quick fixes and the easy life.

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness was about further establishing Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Not for himself, but for those of us who would follow. And if you think that Jesus' temptation ended with that story and he was never tempted again, well continue to read the gospels with that in mind. Jesus was consistently being tempted to become who people wanted him to be, a victorious leader overthrowing the systems of his time.

He was asked by many to do things on their terms rather than on God's. Each time he refused.

Even on the cross "People passing along the road jeered, shaking their heads in mock lament: 'You bragged that you could tear down the Temple and then rebuild it in three days – so show us your stuff! Save yourself! If you're really God's Son come down from that cross!'" (Matthew 27:37-40)

Still, Jesus never wavered from his trust in God. He knew where true power lay and he also knew that if we, as God's people, would ever be able to trust God, Jesus would have to show that trust unto death. He trusted that God would bring the light of day after the darkness of the cross.

So maybe the task of Lent is to seek more fully our identity as a child of God. In our temptations, to lean into our relationship with God more fully. When we are enticed by certain shortcuts that take us to a more immediate outcome that feels easier, better, less stressful, that satisfies our desires and pleasures, instead to pause and think about God. Where God might be in the moment with us? Not what would Jesus do, but rather what would God have us do that is in line with an abundant life that has more to do with compassion, grace, forgiveness, and the love that God promises and gives.

It is so easy to fall down when it comes to our living. We fall short consistently of what we are called to be as Christians - to be the people of God. And it is no wonder. We have this view that maybe God is withholding something from us. That there is greener grass on the other side of the hill. Or maybe it is something akin to the apple that Adam and Eve choose to eat, a promise to know more or understand more even when it will alter our lives and not in a good way.

Temptation is like that. It shows up wrapped in bows and promises of power, influence, fame, importance, money. I could go on. We are all enticed by those things on some level. Though Jesus' temptation was on a whole other level, there are links to what we experience. Theologian Douglas Hare writes in a commentary,

The basic, underlying temptation that Jesus shared with us is the temptation to treat God as less than God. We may not be tempted to turn stones into bread, but we are constantly tempted to mistrust God's readiness to empower us to face our trials. None of us is likely to put God to the test by leaping from a cliff, but we are frequently tempted to question God's helpfulness when things go awry; we forget the sure promise, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Pagan idolatry is no more a temptation for us than it was for Jesus, but compromise with the ways of the world is a continuing seduction."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas R. A. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching - Matthew*. Series Editor James L. Mays. New Testament Editor Paul J. Achtemeier. John Knox Press, Louisville. 1993. P26.

As congregations I work with look at what is coming, what God is doing in our time, with us, and in and with the spaces that we call our church, we will face many temptations. Much of that temptation is to treat God as less than God.

I have learned and experienced many times in my own life how easy it is to limit God. Just this week I received news that put me off balance. My normal stance would have been to react, find the balance immediately, start working on a solution. However, being part of the New Beginning program, that St. Andrew's has engaged in, I have learned a new mantra, "Let's be curious."

God is a God of relationships, not of quick fixes. We know that relationships take time and energy. Relationships change and grow. One of the major challenges in marriages can be that as people change and grow they do so separately and find that one day they don't know the person who has been along side them. The resistance to change has been great.

The church, our relationships with one another and with God, changes. We mature in faith, yet we forget that God is continually moving and stretching us. We get so comfortable that we think this is how church is supposed to be while everything around us changing. And if you have been paying attention, with technology and advances in all areas of human experience, change is happening at a pace that has never been experienced by humans at any other time in history.

The temptation is to stay safe, remain the church as we have known it, to find a quick fix to get people in the pews, joining the choir, or one of the church groups. We think we can put lipstick on something we have done before and hope that this time it will be the cure for all that the church is suffering. This is the temptation.

Maybe it is time to trust that God really is God and that God is at work in our congregation, in our lives, in our community, and in the world. But don't look for God in the quick fix, whether it be a quick fix program or a quick fix drink, pill, chocolate cake, or affair – an affair with another person, program, job, or green pasture.

God is present. God's got this. Our part is to be attentive to the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst, be curious, be the people of God in our own time.

Are we going to fall down? You bet. But don't let that be the final outcome. Let your faith and trust in God raise you up again and again. Build your relationship with God, but then let your love, joy, hope, and peace that are gifts from God spill out into the lives of others in your homes, the church, and into the community.

This lent let us be a curious people – curious about ourselves, curious about God, and curious about how we are people called to live from the inside out.