

“What Does ‘Tempted’ Mean?”

Based on Matthew 4: 1-11

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My nephew Rowan is four years old. That glorious age of questions where “why?” replaces “no!” as the most used word. In addition to “why,” one must be prepared to define any word one uses. “What does ‘schedule’ mean?” “What does ‘route’ mean?” “What does ‘frustrated’ mean?” But you can’t get frustrated with him, because you know that he’s building his vocabulary and you know that it’s good for him. But oh my goodness! I never realized before just how difficult it is to define most words.

Last weekend, someone used the word “tempted.” I’m not even sure who said it (probably me) or the exact context. But it probably had something to do with fattening food. “I’m tempted to order a jumbo burrito.” “What does ‘tempted’ mean?” *Pause.* Good question, isn’t it? What *does* tempted mean? We throw the word around a lot, usually in reference to trivial things, like jumbo burritos, but how often do we think about it our spiritual lives? My sister answered that temptation is “when you really want to do something.” My friend added, “and maybe you shouldn’t.” How often do we face, and overcome, temptation in our spiritual lives: things we really want to do, and maybe we shouldn’t?

In today’s scripture, Jesus is faced with temptation. He was led out into the wilderness by the Spirit. He fasted for forty days and forty nights. Forty days and forty nights without food, perhaps without water, the scripture tells us he is famished and then—*then*—the tempter enters presenting three temptations. “Jesus, you must be awfully hungry... Why don’t you just turn these stones here into some nice tasty loaves of bread.” It’s only been a few hours since I’ve eaten and those loaves of bread sound mighty nice to me, imagine after a forty day fast? And we know what Jesus *could* have done it, because he does perform miracles in all four gospels. Jesus heals, he multiplies loaves and fishes, in John he even turns water into wine. But all of those miracles are for the sake of others. None of his miracles are done for his own benefit or as magic tricks to impress.

Surely Jesus could have turned those stones into loaves. Except he couldn’t have. Because if he did, he wouldn’t have been the Messiah. If he succumbed to the temptation of power, he would not have been the Christ. As one commentator notes, “Clearly, easy living is not part of sonship. Indeed, closeness to God involves conflict and struggle that will lay bare one’s deepest passion and loyalty. Central to each of the challenges that Jesus faces is a single question: to what extent will he trust God to be God and so be himself?”¹ So Jesus resists the temptation of material gain saying, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

And the tempter goes on, upping the ante, taking him to the top of the temple, essentially holding him out over the ledge and saying, “If you’re the Son of God, God won’t let you get hurt if you throw yourself off. Prove to me, prove to yourself, that you are the Son

¹ Robert A. Bryant, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 45.

of God.” The temptation of security is not only about physical security, but about the security of knowing who he is. “Prove who you are, Jesus.” And Jesus responds, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

The final temptation, is for all the power in the world for the mere price of switching loyalty from God to the devil. He says, “All these I will give you.” He offers *things* to Jesus: kingdoms, splendor, power. But all are offered at the cost of freedom. To prioritize things over the worship and service of God is not only idolatry, but is the opposite of freedom. Paul Tillich, a renowned theologian of the last century noted, “We long for a Christ of power. Yet if [*Christ*] were to come and transform us and our world, we should have to pay the one price which we could not pay: we would have to lose our freedom, our humanity, and our spiritual dignity. Perhaps we should be happier, but we should also be lower beings, our present misery, struggle and despair notwithstanding.... Those who dream of a better life and try to avoid the Cross as a way, and those who hope for a Christ and attempt to exclude the Crucified have no knowledge of the mystery of God and humanity.”²

But what does this mean for us? Who among us will ever be tempted to turn a stone into bread (or a jumbo burrito)? Who among us will face the temptation to see if God’s angels will recognize us as the Messiah and save us from harm? Who among us will be offered unlimited worldly power in return for worshipping the devil? And yet, who among us has not been faced with the temptations of misplaced priorities in: material goods, security, and/or power?

Maryetta Anschutz, an Episcopal educator explains temptation this way: “Temptation comes to us in the moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough. Temptation comes in judgments we make about strangers or friends who make choices we do not understand. Temptation rules us, making us able to look away from those in need and to live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger, and disease. Temptation rages in moments when we allow our temper to define our lives or when addiction to wealth, power, influence over others, vanity, or an inordinate need for control defines who we are. Temptation wins when we engage in the justification of little lies, small sins: a racist joke, a questionable business practice for the greater good, a criticism of a spouse or partner when he or she is not around. Temptation wins when we get so caught up in the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself. These are the faceless moments of evil that, while mundane, lurk in the recesses of our lives and our souls.”³

Today’s reading begins with a phrase that is unique to Matthew, the statement that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness specifically “to be tempted by the devil.” It has been noted that “this purpose statement...suggests that Matthew considered Jesus’ intentional confrontation with evil to be instructive.”⁴ The devil is testing Jesus, and in a way Jesus is being tempted also by God (the Spirit took him out to the wilderness) yet, as Jesus notes, **God** is not to be tested.

² Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner’s, 1953), 148.

³ Maryetta Anschutz, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 48.

⁴ Robert A. Bryant, *ibid.*, 45.

How often do we, or people we know succumb to the temptation of testing God? Or making deals with God? “God, if you’ll just get me through _____ I’ll never do _____ again.” Or “I’ll always do _____ from now on.” Or “God, if you really are there, give me a sign.” But Jesus’ experience in the wilderness—and our Lenten experience—is about re-ordering that relationship. Reminding ourselves that God is God and we are not God. God is not to be tested, *we* are to be tested. But even our own testing is not for the sake of evaluation or scoring. We don’t get a grade. It’s not pass/fail. Rather, it’s an opportunity to grow spiritually, to grow in our relationship with God.

So this Lenten season, I invite you to join me in doing something to make room for noticing God in your life. Consider *giving something up* so that every time we pass up that food, drink or habit we crave, our attention is re-directed back to God. Consider *adding something* such as prayer, biblical or spiritual reading or volunteering where there is need.

Take some time to consider what Lenten Discipline you might commit to this year. The possibilities are endless and a varied and unique as we are as individuals. Here are a few possibilities:

Possible Lenten Disciplines

1. E-fast, i.e., choose one day a week in which you do not access the internet either at the computer or on other devices.
2. Surrender a favorite TV program and use that time to mediate, read scripture or something on spirituality, take a walk, or just spend time with a loved one talking, playing a game, or doing something you enjoy doing together.
3. If you have an extra busy family who rarely dine together, commit to one home-cooked meal a week that includes every family member.
4. Spend time in solitude each day, even if you can find only five minutes.
5. Read a book on spiritual growth.
6. Keep of journal of prayer concerns, questions and/or reading.
7. Focus on gratitude in prayer.
8. Work on physical discipline if that is a challenge for you, i.e., getting adequate rest, nutritious food, exercise.
9. Forgive someone who has caused a hurt.
10. Visit an art museum or attend a concert and reflect on the sacred in your experience.
11. Spend some time in nature each week and reflect on the sacred in Creation.
12. Take on some loving task.
13. Write a letter of gratitude each week to a person who has been a great blessing in your life.
14. Plan breakfast, coffee or dinner with someone you would like to know better.
15. Practice environmental faithfulness such as recycling, reducing use of heavily packaged and processed foods.
16. Reflect on your baptismal promise to “renounce all evil and powers in the world which defy God’s righteousness and love.” This can be invoked in simple daily life, e.g., road rage, praying for peace and justice regarding specific issues such as human trafficking, homelessness, etc.

17. During your lunch or break time at work, take just a few minutes to access an Internet prayer site. Suggestions below.
18. Give up eating out and donate the money you would have spent at restaurants to One Great Hour of Sharing, or any other charity.
19. Spend a few minutes a day reducing the clutter in your life.
20. Download the Lenten Devotions on the PCUSA website, www.pcusa.org. Use “Lenten Devotions” in the search block.

Maryetta Anschutz notes, “Lenten penitence engages the dark places in our lives that we may come face to face with them, name them, understand them, and seek forgiveness for them. It is not about guilt. [Or, I would add, empty penitence.] It is about freedom from the control that our fears and insecurities have over us all, about the amendment of life and new beginnings.”⁵

Remembering, “Temptation wins when we get so caught up in the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself,”⁶ let us take some time this season to remove ourselves from those trappings of life to re-orient ourselves toward God. Make room for God this Lenten season, perhaps by removing a comfort, crutch or obstacle to God in our lives. Perhaps it will be an opportunity to give up a vice permanently that you’ve been meaning, wanting to give up. Remember, Jesus was “famished” by his forty days in the wilderness. Fasting, being “famished” opens us up to spiritual experience. Going without something we are accustomed to or comfortable with makes room for us to focus on God in our lives. Though Jesus was weakened physically by the experience of fasting, he was strengthened spiritually. But a Lenten discipline doesn’t have to be about giving up something, it can be about taking on something. Whatever your Lenten discipline, whether it is difficult or pleasurable, let it be an opportunity for growth. This Lent, prepare yourself for the mystery of Easter by freeing yourself from the splendor and allure of *things* and that which takes up space that could be made for God.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, as we enter this time of Lent, remembering your fasting in the wilderness, remembering your temptations overcome, we pray that you will be with us, guide us, help us as we seek to grow through Lenten disciplines. Help us to remember that these disciplines are not about giving up or taking on for the sake of giving up or taking on, but for the sake of re-ordering our lives and re-orienting ourselves toward God. Help us to remember that these disciplines are not meant as way to punish ourselves, but as an opportunity for growth. Help us to remember that it’s not about success or failure and to get back on the horse even if we fall away from our discipline on occasion throughout the season of Lent. We pray these things in your name, our brother, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

⁵ Maryetta Anschutz, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*