**January 15th, 2023 Service**

**Scripture:**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2After he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3Then the tempter approached him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

4He answered, “It is written: **Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.**”

5Then the devil took him to the holy city, had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, 6and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written:

**He will give his angels** **orders concerning you**,
and **they will support you with their hands**
**so that you will not strike**
**your foot against a stone.**”

7Jesus told him, “It is also written: **Do not test the Lord your God.**”

8Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9And he said to him, “I will give you all these things if you will fall down and worship me.”

10Then Jesus told him, “Go away, Satan! For it is written: **Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.**”

11Then the devil left him, and angels came and began to serve him.

**Meditating on the Scriptures**

**Message:** “From the mouth of God”

Have you every felt really close to God? Is there a moment, or a time of you life that you think back to where you remember having a clear, tangible experience of God’s presence? We often call these the “mountaintop” experiences, in reference to when Moses would go up on the mountain and meet with God. In these moments it seems that all will be well- that nothing will shake our faith.

But then, often, we experience a time where we feel alone. A time when we question God and wonder whether what we thought we had experienced in such a real way actually *was* real. And in those moments, desperation can creep in, we wonder if God is testing us, and we become unsure of what we were once so sure of.

Often, the lowest lows, and the most difficult trials come after our mountaintop experiences. And while this can feel discouraging, and strange, there is a way in which it makes sense.

The scriptures are very clear that there is a very real, very active evil presence in this world. An adversary that does his all that he can to undermine God’s good plans, and sow chaos and darkness into the world. The scriptures use a number different names for this fallen spiritual being: “the serpent”, “the Satan” (which means “the adversary”), “the devil” (which means “the accuser”), “Beelzebul” (which means “lord of the flies/excrement”), “the evil one”, “the enemy”, and “the father of lies” to name a few.

Naturally, whenever the devil sees that God is moving powerfully in a person’s life, he will make an attempt to undermine it; to make them question their purpose and their God. C.S. Lewis, the author of the *Chronicles of Narnia* (and many other very worthwhile books) wrote about how the devil is not nearly as concerned with those who are not really living for God, because they are not a threat. It is those who take God and his Word seriously that pose a real threat to the darkness and evil in this world.

Think of all the disciples, particularly Peter, who have just eaten the last supper, and witnessed all the miraculous works of Jesus for three years. Each of them promises Jesus that they will never turn away from him; and even though he warns them beforehand, they still all run away and deny him. Peter famously denies Jesus not once, not twice, but *three* times.

Adam and Eve, fresh off having been given all authority over the earth, and handed everything they could ever ask for, along with a tree of knowledge: good and evil, that they are told never to eat from. Even though God has warned them that the consequence will be death, they make a choice so devastating to the world that we now call it “the” fall.

It’s clear that there are times where God allows testing. We read that Jesus in led out into the wilderness “to be tempted by the devil.” Each of us have experienced temptation each and every day of our lives. God allows us to bring real good into this world, or to bring real evil. He gives us the dignity of this choice and allows our faith to be tested. This does not mean that God tempts us—we are promised that he never will (James 1:13)— but he does bring good out of even our temptations.

Each time we do not give in to the tempter’s voice, is a victory over evil. Martin Luther said, “You cannot keep birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.” It is not wrong to be tempted, indeed, we cannot stop all temptations, and Jesus himself was tempted (Hebrews 4:15). What is wrong is to give into temptation.

But how do we avoid giving in? Many of us can likely sympathise with the words of Oscar Wilde, “I can resist all things except temptation.” Thankfully, our readings today give us a literal master class in resisting temptation, and the key is very simple. Each time that the devil tempts Jesus, Jesus uses the same vital tool: the scriptures. As a young man, Jesus had studied his scriptures over, and over. He is very aware and secure in his identity, and when the temptations come, he has an answer for each one.

We hear a lot right now about identities of one sort or another, and I think that is no accident. Identity is incredibly important. It shapes everything about who we are, and everything about us. Our identity is the answer to that question, “who am I?”. That is why we must be so careful about what we decide to make our identity. There will be temptations from every side to make our job, or family, or sexuality, or religious denomination, or past hurts our identity.

But there is only one identity that is ultimately true, and ultimately important: you and I are children of God. And being children of God is a really big deal.

There is a story I read of a soldier during the civil war who lost both his brother and his dad to death on the same day. He wanted to see the president and plead his case, and he was given a pass to do so. He went to the White House but was told by the guard on duty, “You can’t see the president, young man! Don’t you know there’s a war going on? The president is a very busy man! Now go away, son! Get back out there on the battle lines where you belong!”

So, the young soldier left, very disheartened, and was sitting on a little park bench not far from the White House when a little boy came up to him. The lad said, “You look unhappy. What’s wrong?” The soldier looked at the little boy and began to spill his heart to him. He told of his father and his brother being killed in the war, and of the desperate situation at home. He explained that his mother and sister had no one to help them with the farm. The little boy listened and said, “I can help you.” He took the soldier by the hand and led him back to the front gate of the White House. Apparently, the guard didn’t notice them, because they weren’t stopped. They walked straight to the front door of the White House and walked right in. After they got inside, they walked right past generals and high-ranking officials, and no one said a word. The soldier couldn’t understand this. Why didn’t anyone try to stop them?

They reached the Oval Office—where the president was working—and the little boy didn’t even knock on the door. He just walked right in and led the soldier in with him. There behind the desk was Abraham Lincoln and his Secretary of State, looking over battle plans that were laid out on his desk.

The president looked at the boy and then at the soldier and said, “Good afternoon, Tad. Can you introduce me to your friend?”  Tad Lincoln, the son of the president, said, “Daddy, this soldier needs to talk to you.” The soldier pled his case before Mr. Lincoln, and right then and there he received the exemption that he desired.

Being a child of God changes everything. It means that we have access to him, and that we have an important purpose. It means that we have access to his resources, and his wisdom. Being God’s child means that he loves us and takes care of us, and there is nothing that can change that.

But the devil will try and make us question and forget this at every turn, because he knows it is the most important thing about us. The devil knows that he is going down, but he won’t go down without a fight, and wants to cause as much damage as he can.

This is why, just after God has told Jesus, “you are my Son, with whom I am well pleased” the devil seeks to undermine Jesus’ identity. Notice that his first two questions begin by saying to Jesus, “*if* you are the son of God”. He is doing his best to question and cast doubt on who Jesus is. To put Jesus on the defensive, and get him to give into the temptation of trying to prove who he is.

The first temptation is fairly straightforward. Jesus, we have just been told, has spent forty days in the wilderness, and understandably, we are told he is hungry. So, Satan tries to entice him into giving into his practical human desires. Which one of us hasn’t done or said something we regretted because we were hadn’t eaten? But Jesus responds with the scriptures: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” In saying this, Jesus reminds us that life is far more than our physical comforts- even the most basic ones. Nothing is more important that God’s word.

Next, the devil takes a different tactic. He even references the from the Psalm that we read together earlier, Psalm 91. He says, “God promises that he will protect you if you jump from the temple! “on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”” But Jesus not only knows some scripture verses, he understands them, and knows that they can be twisted and misquoted. He knows that God could, and would, protect him, but that isn’t the point. God is not a Genie that we can command to do our will. And Jesus has no need to prove his identity. “Again it is written,” Jesus says “you shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

The final temptation is perhaps the most strange to us, because it seems obvious that Jesus would never be tempted to worship the devil, and he didn’t seem to have much interest in gaining power. But what the devil is offering here is a shortcut to Jesus mission on earth. Remember that in the fall, humanity handed over the authority God had given them over the world to the serpent. The serpent is now offering to give that authority back, but at a cost. If Jesus will worship him, he promises that Jesus can skip to the end of his mission and take back authority without needing to suffer and die.

He is offering Jesus that chance to achieve the right goal by the wrong means. It is not wrong for Jesus to have the power and glory over all the kingdoms of the world, in fact, it is why he has come. But no outcome, no matter how good, is worth bowing down and partnering with evil. To worship and serve anyone other than God is the most important thing, and nothing is worth compromising that. “Be gone Satan!” Jesus says. “For it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”

So, the devil does leave. And after all of his fasting and faithfulness, the angels do come and serve his weary body. Jesus shows us the truth of James 4:7 which says, “Submit to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

But to resist, we need to know the words that have come from the very mouth of God, the scriptures. Even Jesus doesn’t rely on his own understanding, he goes back to God’s word every time, and knows it so well that he won’t let it be twisted. And he knows that he never needs to question his identity as God’s son, which frees him up to simply speak the truth and not feel backed into defending himself.

Temptations and trials will come. And we will feel the pulls of comfort, and of wanting to be in control, and of doing the wrong things for the right reasons. We will be tempted to question our identity as God’s children, or to put our identity in other things. But we are in good company. Jesus himself was tempted as well but showed us both that it is possible to hold firm, and that there is forgiveness when we do not.

And so, I want to close with these wonderful words from Romans 8.

 The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

12 Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. 13 For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

15 So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, “Abba, Father.” 16 For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children. 17 And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God’s glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.

18 Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. 19 For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are…

35 Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? 36 (As the Scriptures say, “For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.”) 37 No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:16-21, 35-39)

Thanks be to God!