



## It's Tempting – Touchpoint for February 22, 2023

**Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSVUE)** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. <sup>2</sup> He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward 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 glory, <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> Then 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.

### **Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.**

*“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil.”*

The “Temptation of Jesus” story is one of my favorites in the Bible. Yeah, I know, I’m weird. And it’s one of my favorites not so much because of what it says, but because of people’s reaction or interpretation of it. You see, I’m one of those people who is fascinated at times, not just by articles I read, but by people’s reactions and comments to the article.

And that’s the situation in this case as well.

It’s called the “Temptation of Jesus” story. And there are two major players in this drama. Just two. Though I suppose you could mention the Holy Spirit that leads Jesus at the beginning. But for the rest of the drama, it’s just Jesus and the devil.

Now, I want you to think of other stories we read about Jesus and how we interpret them. When we read about Jesus healing people, we talk about how Jesus heals us. When we read about Jesus calming a storm, we talk about how Jesus calms the storms of our lives. When we read about Jesus forgiving sins, we talk about how Jesus forgives us.

In general when we talk about stories of Jesus, there is Jesus doing his thing, and we are the ones Jesus is healing, calming, forgiving. We are the ones to whom Jesus is doing something. That's what all the commentators tell us.

Except this passage. You see, in this passage there is only Jesus and the devil. And if we are not going to be Jesus in this story, it only leaves us one option... and that's an option we don't care for. And so we flip.

We become Jesus in this story. We become the one who is tempted. Jesus becomes not one who does something to us, but rather, Jesus becomes our role model. That's what all the commentators tell us.

Now, I'm not against Jesus being a role model. I actually wish people had taken seriously those WWJD bracelets they wore. There would be a lot less hunger and homelessness in the world. I never did see one of them go and sell all they had and give it to the poor. Oh well!

But I want to argue for a little consistency today. So let's not be too quick to equate ourselves with Jesus. We rarely do it with other passages, so why start now?

I want to argue for a little consistency today. What if we continue in our normal ways of interpretation and say that Jesus is Jesus, and we are the other.

If we do, then the question that comes out of this passage is not, "How am I tempted?" But rather, "How do I tempt God to be a transactional God?" – "How do I tell God who to be and how to act?" – "How do I play 'quid pro quo' games with God?"

"God, just do this for me and I will worship you back!" Or "God, just let me pray this simple prayer, and then you can save me."

"Jesus, why don't you just turn these stones into bread and feed the world?" Of course, the added bonus is... then I don't have to feed the world. We pray, "Why don't you just feed the world, God?"

And God replies, "Why don't you?"

"Jesus, do something amazing in your life that will convince others of God's presence!"

And again the reply comes back, "Why don't you?"

Let's face it, we are always tempting God. We are always playing games with the Mystery. We want a transactional God; we're trying to make deals that will get us out of responsibility to our fellow humanity.

But who wants to look at that? I would much rather think of myself like a holy and pure Jesus, who gets tempted by the evil one or those evil ones... over there... out there... beyond me.

But if I am honest with myself, if I am truthful with myself, I know who I'm more like in this story than not.

If I am honest with myself, I find myself in much greater agreement with the commentary I once read on the Lord's Prayer and the petition, "Lead us not into temptation." The commentator wrote, "*Lead us not into temptation.*" *What does this mean? "It means I do not need God to lead me into temptation because I am more than capable of finding it on my own."*

And not only am I more than capable of finding it on my own, I am more than capable of transmitting it to others – even to the Divine. I'm more than willing to play the temptation game with others – even God.

Think of the prosperity gospel. It is nothing more than a belief system that says you can "Game God." You can turn the Mystery into a system of rewards. You can control the Divine.

That is always our temptation. To turn the Mystery into a system we can master and control. Heck, I spent four years and thousands of dollars to get a "**MASTER** of Divinity" degree. I should know.

But here's the good news: Jesus does not give into temptation.

But even more importantly, Jesus doesn't give into MY temptations... OUR temptations. Jesus is uncontrollable.

He simply will not play our games. He will not buy into our systems of mastery and control, reward and punishment. He will not be the Messiah as we conceive him. We can tempt God to be another kind of God, and God will have nothing of it.

Jesus isn't interested in our self-indulgence, or even his. He isn't interested in making **our** impossible goals possible, but in making **his** goal of forgiveness possible.

He isn't interested in temptation, but transformation.

You can quote scripture to him, and he will have none of it. He knows our games and how we will twist words and meanings to get what we want. Quoting scripture does not make us the final authority. Even the devil can do that.

*"To Hell with you and your quoting of scripture,"* he basically says. *"If you are quoting scripture to further your own ends and for your own benefit, 'to Hell with you.' I've got more important things to do than abide by your misuse of scripture."*

And then, when we couldn't control him with scripture... when we couldn't control him with our religiosity and piety... we tried to control him with hammers and nails.

Certainly now, he would understand how the game is played. Certainly now, he would understand the rules.

He betrayed our ways of speaking and dealing with the Divine Mystery, so we decided to betray him back. He denied our ways of speaking and dealing with the Divine Mystery, so we denied him back. Certainly the threat of death would change him.

And yet, he wouldn't give in.

You see, Jesus isn't interested in temptation, but transformation.

So, here is the good news: The Divine will not give in to our temptations to control or manipulate It. We can tempt God to be another kind of God, and God will have nothing of it.

### **God will not be a transactional God.**

Grace, mercy and forgiveness cannot be manipulated and controlled. They are free. They are gifts. And they cannot be stopped.

Our temptations cannot stop them. Our piety and scripture quoting cannot stop them. Our denials and betrayals cannot stop them.

Not even our hammers and nails and death can stop the love, grace, and forgiveness of the Divine.

From the bread and wine of this meal to the pronouncement of forgiveness on the cross, the Mystery reveals what Paul stated so well:

*"For I am convinced that neither life, nor death, nor things past, nor things to come... Nor powers nor principalities... (nor even our tempting God), can stop us from being loved by the Divine Mystery."*

**Amen.**

## **Spirit in the Desert**

### **Opening Songs**

#### **Be Still**

(The London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God

#### **Create in Me**

(The Concordia Choir)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence and take not the holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and uphold me with thy free spirit.

### **Bible Passage**

*(A passage takes us from one place to another)*

### **Touchpoint**

*(Where God's story touches our life story)*

#### **See Him**

(Keith Duke)

**See him**: 1) silent and lifeless, 2) alone and forlorn, 3) broken and helpless...crowned with a garland of thorns, 4) as son and as brother, 5) related to all, 6) through the grief of a mother...hurting the most of all, 7) as healer and teacher, 8) as helper and friend, 9) as prophet and preacher...

Ignore Him? I doubt if you can.

### **The Meal**

#### **The Lord's Prayer**

(“Our Father,” Taize Reflections)

### **Benediction**

#### **Gaelic Blessing/Deep Peace**

(John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers)

Deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the flowing air to you.  
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you.  
Deep peace of the gentle night to you. Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.  
Deep peace of Christ, of Christ the light of the world to you.  
Deep peace of Christ to you.