

“Hungry”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
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Matthew 4:1-11 Sermon
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI
For Private Distribution Only

You may have noticed that, with today’s gospel reading, we have rewound a bit, moving from Chapter 17 of the gospel of Matthew last week...all the way back to Chapter 4 this week. The topic of temptation would seem to fit more comfortably into the Lenten season--when we consciously turn our focus to human brokenness—than into Epiphany’s celebration of the light of God’s incarnate presence in the world.

In all three Synoptic Gospels--Matthew, Mark and Luke—the story of Jesus’ temptation occurs immediately after his baptism. Jesus barely had a chance to savor that sacred event, the blessing of the Holy Spirit and declaration of his status as beloved son of God. There was no time to relax and ponder its significance in his heart. No, Jesus was led into the thick of things from the turning point of his baptism on. That had to be quite a jarring transition--basking in his father’s love one moment, struggling under the devil’s manipulation the next. In abruptly moving us from the glory of Jesus’ transfiguration last week into the darkness of his and Adam and Eve’s temptations today, the lectionary editors have provided us with a taste of this transition.

So here we are, plunked down in the wilderness with Jesus...to fast and be challenged... for f-o-r-t-y days! Of course, there’s some biblical precedent for this. No sooner had the Israelites escaped Egypt through the Red Sea’s parted waters then they were led into a 40-year wilderness quest for an elusive Promised Land. Here in northern Michigan, our eyes tend to light up when we hear that “wilderness” word. Serene images of remote lakes and forests, fishing, hiking, and camping dance through our heads. But, were we back in Moses’ or Jesus’ contexts, fear would have been a more likely response. *Their* wilderness was a barren and lawless place haunted by

demons, wild beasts, and savage wandering tribes; a wasteland where people became bewildered and disoriented. It was probably the last spot anyone wanted to be. In such a place, it would be easy to panic, fall prey to doubt and in-fighting...maybe even to bargain with false gods for a little comfort and distraction from the harsh immediate reality. The book of Exodus tells us that this was indeed the response of God's chosen people, the Israelites. Their faith fell by the wayside when faced with physical, emotional, and spiritual challenge. And it would happen time and time again throughout Old Testament history.

Yet the Israelites are not so unique in that regard. Let's face it. It's hard to stand firm in our faith and our convictions when stumbling blocks are set before us in the midst of lives already barren, trying, or chaotic. In a general sense, it's easy to empathize with the Israelites. But, unless you've been hopelessly lost in the desert for an extended period of time, it's probably a little more difficult to truly relate to the exact nature of their plight. Then again, John the Baptist seems to have freely chosen a holy life in the wilderness, complete with sumptuous meals of locusts and honey, so perhaps one person's wilderness is another's paradise.

It is simply and inexplicably woven into the nature of human life that we will all face deeply challenging tests and often at highly unexpected moments ...like on the coattails of a profound spiritual experience. What can't be predicted is the exact substance of those trials. They vary according to our unique circumstances and dispositions. Some temptations will be far more nuanced than others, with sin masquerading as something entirely other. Few, if any, will be as clearly marked as the devil's dialogue with Jesus or the serpent's with Eve. And forget about trying to top one another's wilderness tales. Qualitatively, we can never know quite what it feels

like to walk in one another's shoes. My brand of wilderness simply does not translate directly to yours.

That said, only from my own experience can I speak with any real authority. My trials parallel the tests Jesus faced only ever so loosely, so please bear with me here...The devil's first proposition to a famished Jesus, his offer to turn useless stones into nourishing bread, is said by some to represent the desire for immediate gratification. Living as we do today--in a constantly connected consumer culture, it's nearly impossible for us to avoid run-ins with this one. For me this particular temptation came to a head about seven years ago when I'd hit a plateau in my life's purpose and an arid patch in my spiritual life. I'd already achieved many of my personal goals, ascending the career ladder and buying my own home chief among them. While I did still hold out hope for a husband and family, Mr. Right continued to elude me. Bored, hungry, and uncertain what to do with myself next, I compensated with seemingly innocent play. I ate out a lot. I visited spas. I built up my wardrobe. I checked the weekly sale circulars religiously, targeting my next kitchen or garden gadget purchase...Until one day I looked in the mirror and was frightened by my reflection. How hollow and self involved my day to day existence had become. It simply did not represent my stated values, and, frankly, it wasn't even all that satisfying. Gorging on empty calories, I was still hungry, starving, in fact. Most importantly, I knew all my activities and purchases were static contrived to prevent me from doing what I was actually called to do with my life. While I may not believe in a personal devil, when white noise becomes addictive and interferes with higher purposes, I don't hesitate to call it satanic.

The devil's second suggestion to Jesus—that he throw himself off a pinnacle and let angels come to his rescue—has been characterized by the late Catholic priest Henri Nouwen as the temptation

to be spectacular. Satan's third and final offer—that Jesus would be given all the world's splendors in exchange for his worship—is the related temptation to be powerful. As you've probably gathered over the past year, I tend to keep a pretty low profile, but for a time I wrestled with my own version of these trials. As you know, I worked in the book publishing industry for eighteen years prior to entering seminary. By then I was director of a department. But that had been a long time coming. For years I occupied one tedious administrative job after another and feared I would never find an "in" to management. I was thrilled when things began to shift, my experience was recognized, I advanced into management roles, and eventually won a speed dial slot on a former CEO's phone.

As book publishing goes, CEO Jack was something of a rock star. His temper was rivaled only by his charisma. He had been sufficiently prominent on the 1980s' Manhattan party circuit to have been cast as a character in Jay McInerney's bestselling novel *Bright Lights Big City*. Not only that, but he was proud enough to be bragging about it twenty years later. Yes, I dreaded his random tirades over the speakerphone and all the anxiety and overtime hours required to execute his unreasonable requests. But, in his better moments, Jack showered me with praise and often publicly at company meetings. As inventory director at any other company, I probably would have occupied a remote back office. At this one I was made to feel like I ruled the inventory management universe. Without me, operations would have all but ground to a halt.

When Jack was replaced several years ago, my new boss reduced my position to its appropriate stature. I fought it for awhile, trying unsuccessfully to reinvent my role. But the truth was, he had done me a favor. I had never meant to stay that long. This wasn't *really* my passion. According to my own calculations, after transferring to Colorado, I was supposed to have been figuring out

my true vocation. I had instead allowed myself to get hooked, sidetracked, and sated by flattery and prestige, however limited in scope. Against a pile of uninspired Excel spreadsheets that made my head spin, the angels would finally rescue me from my folly.

Undoubtedly, I failed these tests and of that I am not proud. Like each of you, I am human and do not have a perfect scorecard. But there is good news here, even amidst the ashes of regret and missed opportunities. Remember that the Holy Spirit accompanied Jesus throughout his encounter with the devil. The same is true for us. We are promised that God will never leave or forsake us. Help is always just a prayer away, no matter how desolate or challenging the wilderness in which we find ourselves. We can acknowledge our weakness as human beings and allow the power of God to do the heavy lifting for us.

Not only this, but, even when we do miss the mark and glaringly succumb to temptation, God remains by our sides and creatively recalculates the route, nudging us back toward the right path. How do I know this? Because my own journey is case in point. No sooner had I tired of aimlessness and materialism and seen the dubious distinction of my senior management position plummet, then a UCC minister walked into my life. He would become my friend after performing the funeral of my beloved great aunt, the oh so aptly named Grace. Through my relationship with this pastor, my call to ministry and desire to return to the denomination of my baptism would gradually emerge. None of this, I believe, was a coincidence. We need only look to the Synoptic gospels, where either the debut of Jesus' public ministry or the calling of his disciples immediately follows his forty-day fast and wilderness challenge. This consistent chronology suggests intentionality on the part of the books' authors. Far from a random

occurrence, the trials of Jesus were a critical component of his spiritual and vocational formation--opportunities for growth and discernment.

If we let them, our wilderness challenges too can purposefully mold us, enabling us to hear and respond in new and deeper ways to God's unique call for the next steps of each of our journeys. Tests, even those we don't pass with flying colors, need not defeat us. Hunger and barren wilderness, no matter how severe, need not overcome us. For ours is a god of presence and possibility.

As we step away from the light of Epiphany into the dark soul searching of Lent, out of warm baptismal waters onto the rocky road that leads to the cross, let us remember that ours is a God of salvation and redemption who never, ever gives up on us no matter how bewildered, disoriented, or distracted we might become on the winding path to wholeness. Whether safely tucked into our homes or enduring the harshest of conditions, in every season, our god's name is Emmanuel, God with us.