

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon

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Lesson: Matthew 4:1-11

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I once saw a bumper sticker that read, “Lead me not into temptation; I can find it all by myself.” That is most certainly true. We can find it all by ourselves. I think it is very interesting that we were taught by Jesus to ask, “Lead us not into temptation,” yet -- as we are told in the first verse of today’s gospel reading -- he was the one who was “led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Hmm... The truth is that God is not in the business of leading us into temptation. According to scripture, God may “test our faith,” but that isn’t the same as God walking us toward a room with Satan inside, shoving us in, locking the door, and walking away. No. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God does not lead us into temptation. Rather, God is in the business of delivering us from evil.

What I make of Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted is that Jesus did this on our behalf. He was led to the wilderness to ensure that we would never have to go through this scenario of being alone with Satan. In doing so, Jesus also made clear that what is truly life-giving is found within certain boundaries that God has in place. There are a lot of allures and temptations that might lead us to believe that within them “life-to-the-fullest” can be obtained. Offers of shortcuts to a better life. Satan was trying to tempt Jesus into taking these shortcuts, and it is easy to see the timeless nature of these allures. Yet Jesus persisted and prevailed. He sought to have fullness-of-life within the boundaries that God intends.

Satan was telling a famished Jesus that if he's the Son of God, then he should just make food appear. That would certainly be life-giving, but it is not within the boundaries that God intends. This is the allure of giving up who we are in order to temporarily assuage our physical desires. Satan was telling Jesus to throw caution to the wind and risk death, because Jesus should be able to trust in God's word found in scripture. Placing trust in God's word is commendable, but the life-giving boundary that God intends is that we will read scripture deeply, acknowledging how profound and multifaceted it is, and obtaining wisdom through the process of wrestling with scripture. In doing so, we wrestle with the mysteries of God and find ourselves growing deeper in God. The allure Satan offers is the impulse to latch onto simple, black and white interpretations of scripture, satiating our all-too-human desire for quick, easy answers. Satan was telling Jesus that he could have power and have the hearts of all people, if Jesus would only worship him. Grabbing power and hungering for influence; isn't this the allure of self-importance?

When we hear this story of Jesus in the wilderness, we should think of the other major story in scripture that takes place in the wilderness: the 40 years the Hebrew people spent there after the Exodus. Every time Jesus quotes scripture to counter Satan, it is a quote from this episode in Israel's history. But also, wasn't it during these 40 years that God presented the Hebrew people with boundaries within which they should live, so they would have fullness of life? Yes, it is. The story of Moses and the people isn't that God gave some rules one day on some tablets, then they twiddled their thumbs for 40 years. No, the story is that God spent those 40 years in a tent in close proximity to these people in their own tents so that they'd come to understand that a full-life is found within the boundaries that God intends

for us. That full-life is not found in the allures and temptations we encounter. And the Hebrew people never once strayed from what intended for them. Wrong.

When we view Jesus' temptation in the wilderness through the lens of the Hebrews' experience, it means that God is going through the temptations of life so that we don't have to go through the temptations alone. Yet, it is more than that. When we look at the story of Jesus' life, it is like God dwelling closely to the people to teach them and shepherd them. When we consider all of his earthly ministry, we see how he later flips Satan's temptations. When Jesus refused to turn the stones into bread, he rejected the allure to give up who he is in order to temporarily assuage his own physical desires. Moreso, Jesus later offers fish and bread to the hungry crowd to assuage their physical desires. When Jesus refused to place his trust in a black-and-white reading of scripture, he rejected the allure of quick and easy answers. Moreso, Jesus spends the bulk of Matthew's gospel teaching and taking his disciples on deep readings of scripture, and telling them, "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven have been given to you." (Matthew 13:11) When Jesus refused to grab power, acclaim, and influence, he rejected the allure of self-promotion. Moreso, Jesus would always humble himself, and it must only be through his cross that the world would ever come to know him.

Satan was trying to get Jesus to fall for the same ol' temptations that humans consistently have fallen for, but Jesus showed how living within God's intended boundaries leads to fullness of life.

Fortunately, we are not bound to always fall to our temptations. We are bound to Jesus, through the promises of God made to us in baptism. We will have temptations, and we will at times fall to them, but we are not bound to them. We are

bound to the one who went head-to-head with Satan so we don't have to. We are bound to the one who teaches us and shepherds us into seeing the abundance of life within God's intended boundaries.

I keep talking about those boundaries, and you might be wondering what I mean by that. To be honest, it is like those 40 years the Hebrew people spent in the wilderness. The 10 Commandments set some ground rules, of course, but ultimately it was through God's close proximity to the people for years in the wilderness that God sought to convey the boundaries around which a full life is lived.

As we look to our lives, likewise we see that Jesus comes in close proximity to us, and it is always full of grace: he feeds us, he teaches us, and he takes on a cross to truly meet us. At that cross he encounters us at the darkest corners of our human experience. When we come to think about it, our dark corners often coincide with our greatest fallings to temptation. Jesus will not lead us to temptation, he will not abandon us to it either. Jesus is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Lent is often seen as a season for us to be introspective and reflective of our own lives. It certainly can... and should... be that. However, don't forget the most important aspect: we should always be focused on what Jesus is doing, not on what we are doing. So in your introspections and reflections during this season, know that Christ is meeting you. Know that Christ is drawing close to you. Know that Christ will never abandon you to temptation. Whether you prevail or fall, Jesus will always draw close to you, see you through it, and bring you to fullness of life.

Amen.