

“Tempted”
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Isaiah 30:1-5; James 1:9-16;
Matthew 3:13-4:11

We continue our series on the Faces of Jesus, that is, different aspects of who Jesus is. Today we hear again that wonderful story about Jesus being baptized. It must have been an incredible moment, particularly for Jesus. Think about it. Coming up out of the water and being greeted by a dove, and hearing the voice of God. That’s one of those pinnacle moments, like going up to the mountain top. What could be better?

The thing about those moments is that they come to an end. I think about those moments when I’ve felt like I’ve done something really great, and got accolades for a little bit. Then everybody goes away. I remember when we were in Lake City, we had people who would come to town in the summertime, and our church would swell up and be full. But then there came a Sunday in October—everybody went home to Texas. I always thought, “What did I do wrong?” It wasn’t really anything. It was time for them to get out of the snow and go back to where it was no longer hundreds of degrees. But in that moment there was a sense of failure.

So when Jesus goes from being at that pinnacle moment and hearing God’s voice, and then going out into the wilderness, it’s a moment where you can feel the temptation as it comes on. “What can I do to get that moment back?”

It feels that way to me. It feels like we are so much people who need others. We need to be known by others. We need to be loved by others. We need to be paid attention to. Sometimes, especially in this time when there aren’t as many ways as some other times to be in relationship with each other, I think it can lead to a little sense of desperation or pressure to try to find a way to be cared for, to be loved, to be paid attention to, to be right, to have others look up to us, to recognize some social power—all those different things.

There’s incredible temptation. Sometimes the temptation is pretty straightforward. You might see some money that somebody dropped on the floor. Do I pick it up and give it back, or do I keep it? But some temptations are harder. It’s the desire that I’ve been talking about to have people pay attention. It’s the desire to be known. It’s the desire to be part of the group. You may recognize that as a desire builds that sometimes the more we try, the harder it is to actually fulfill. But it’s interesting that what it starts with seems to be this idea of desire. We read that piece from James where it says, “It is our own desire, we’re lured and enticed by it.” So as Jesus begins this journey up into the wilderness, it is that very human desire that can be that which lures him.

James goes on to say, “Don’t be deceived.” The hard thing about being deceived is that if we deceive somebody else, they don’t know that we’ve deceived them if we are successful at deceiving them. What about if we deceive ourselves? If we’re successful, we don’t know we’ve deceived ourselves. And yet it feels to me like it’s so easy to do.

James invites us not to be deceived, yet it feels like it's so easy for me to deceive myself if I want something.

I was hiking in the Wind River Range once. It was a warm day; I had my pack on. I looked at my map and I thought, "This is wrong. I've gone much farther than that." So I believed my feeling rather than my map, and sure enough I went off in the wrong direction. How easy it is to deceive ourselves when we want something to be one way or another.

The hard thing for me seems to be not so much living in my own reality as dealing with reality. I don't have a hard time dealing with my own perceptions. It's when my perceptions and reality don't seem to match up. So I can say, "The map must be wrong. After all, I know how far I've hiked. I can feel it." How many times have I done that, where I've thought, "I know this," and found reality was a little different. Then I have to figure it out and deal with it.

So what were the realities that Jesus was dealing with? On some level, it was what was he to do? Who was he to be? That's a reality we all deal with in some ways. Who am I to be? He had a little leg up. He could have chosen, perhaps, to make the stones into bread. It's interesting to me that it says "stones." It's not just a stone. It's not just to deal with his own hunger. It begins to be, "Not only do I get to deal with my own hunger, but I get to distribute bread to everyone." It feels like it would fulfill that desire to be paid attention to, to be the one at the pinnacle, the one everybody else notices.

"Take yourself up to the top of the Temple and throw yourself off. God will catch you and people will see who you are." What type of relationship is built by that kind of experience? It's a much different one from walking around with somebody day after day. Awe and fear versus a sense of grace and love.

Then the third temptation. "You can be at the top every day if you want to be. Just bow down to me," the Tempter said. "You can be the ruler of the world." Jesus says, "No, that's not why I'm here." It says in Philippians 2:6-11 that Jesus didn't regard equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself and took the form of a human being. Here, that's what he's doing. He's acknowledging that he is here to be one of us, to be among us, to show us God's love and grace, not by overwhelming or controlling, but by inviting and offering and guiding.

I found it particularly informative this time as I looked back and thought about how he responded to temptation. Putting his answers together, he said, "I want to listen to God's word. It's everything that comes from God that I want to hear. I don't want to test God, but I want to express profound respect for God. That's worship."

It's interesting to me that oftentimes when I think about trying to deal with temptations, I think, "*I'm* going to steel myself. *I'm* going to figure out how to say no. *I'm* going to be able to overcome." Notice who's doing all that. "I think *I* can do it. I think *I'm* in control. I think *I* can solve my problems." When Jesus is tempted he doesn't say, "No, I'm better than that, Satan." He says, "My focus is on God and when I have a focus on God, I can see what you're asking me to do isn't right." When I focus

on God, when I recognize that what's really important to me is God and God's teachings, then it changes how I act. I want to worship him. I want to give my profound and ultimate respect to God. That, then, shapes what I want to do. Those whom I truly respect, I act differently around than those I don't. If I remember that it is God that I most respect and most value, and that I'm always around God, it leads me to act differently to figure out how to serve him.

When I realize that because God came to us, God shows love to us, it helps us see the wonder of who God is, it is, then, about worship and love and serving God. It changes my whole perspective. It changes my life. It shifts what I'm thinking about. I can very easily spend my days thinking about what I want, the things in my life, instead of thinking about what God wants.

The funny thing is that when I begin to really pay attention, and think about and try to do what God wants, my life becomes better, as well. That piece from James where it says, "When our desires lure and entice us, it gives birth to sin," we see that doing things that aren't good for us, take us farther away from God. When sin becomes alive, it leads us to death, or life that is diminished. So much of what this seems to be about, so much about what God is trying to do with us is to lead us into a fuller life, a better life, a richer life, not the diminished life. The amazing thing that this suggests to me is that the way to get to that better life is not by focusing on myself, but by opening my heart, my mind, my life to the very work of God in Jesus.

It's interesting that as I open to God and allow God to bring me to a place like this, I get to have a community that I wouldn't have had otherwise. As I come to a place like this to worship God, God brings me to a table where I'm reminded how I'm sustained and how I'm part of a community that he calls us into.

It's so amazing to me that when I begin to allow my thoughts to be more about what God wants, how much life becomes better as well. But those desires easily deceive, so I come again and again to recognize his grace, to hear again his word, to participate in the sacrament, and to open my heart, my life, to my God. Amen.