

First Sunday of Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
26 February 2023

Matthew 4:1-11

Have you ever seen the movie *Groundhog Day*? In this movie, Bill Murray's character wakes up day after day to repeat the same events of the day before, in the same order and with the same cast of characters. He doesn't know why he is unable to go back to his former life, and he doesn't know how to move forward. All he knows is that to move forward, he must find out the reason why he is stuck and he must resolve the problem. He wakes up every day to the same radio station, and tries to find clues to help him move forward. He is stuck and remains stuck to the end of the movie. We, too, can get stuck! Sometimes we become so deeply focused on a particular grievance or painful memory that we are simply unable to move beyond it. We wonder if we can ever be forgiven, if we can ever be able to forgive, if God is with us at all, and if our lives will ever recover from this painful event. We get up each day to the same obsessive ruminations and to the same pain. We wish we could go back in history and fix the problem. If only we could go back! Yet, we know that going back is impossible. The past is an unforgiving witness of our failures, and memory can be a most cruel judge.

The wilderness experience is a memory that has remained fixed in the Jewish mind throughout history. The temptations of Jesus in the desert today, remind me of the failures of God's first son, Israel. God called his first son out of Egypt, rescuing them from the grasp of the enemy. Yet over and over again the nation failed God in the wilderness. They were tempted by their hunger, their fear, and their inability to see God present among them. Nostalgia over their time of slavery overtook any dream of a future in liberty. "If only we were back in Egypt!" They failed to see God's larger plan of salvation, as they obsessed about their desert experience. God's first son failed to be obedient to God in a miserable way and the national memory became stuck on this failure forever. Writer after writer in the Old Testament reflected on these experiences and attributed the nation's tragedies to their disobedience. At a time when absolute dependance on God was required, the nation listened to many voices and followed their own paths rather than God's path. In spite of the ministry of prophets, priests, and kings, the nation is still stuck in their disobedience. For the people of God to move forward, the desert failure needs to be resolved!

Today, in the Gospel of Matthew, God's only begotten Son goes willingly into the wilderness to be tested by God and tempted by Satan. He who was *also called out of Egypt* (Matthew 2:15) goes into the desert to accomplish what God's other son, Israel, was unable to do: pass the obedience test. The word used for temptation in this text also means *test*. The idea that God tests us is well developed in Holy Scripture. As in a Physical at a doctor's office, the reason behind the tests is not to trip or to cause to fail, but rather to help the nation to diagnose their condition, and to help them make choices

with clarity. The tests are meant to diagnose the human condition, to see, “whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul” (Deuteronomy 13:3b), to see if Israel will follow God’s instructions or not (Exodus 16:4).

God’s begotten Son is in the wilderness being tested by God and we are told that the devil uses this opportunity of test to tempt Jesus. Jesus responds to each temptation by quoting a Scriptural passage from the nation’s journey in the wilderness when they were called out of Egypt. The first temptation, “make these stones into bread” gets a response from Deuteronomy 8:3, “He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” The context of the verse is the time when the hungry people in the wilderness grumbled and turned against God and their leaders. The first Israel doubted God’s provision, whereas the New Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, trusts that God will provide for his physical needs. He knows that there is much more to life than physical comfort. Seeking the Kingdom of God is more important than food and drink. The first Israel failed this test, Jesus the Christ, remains obedient to God to the bitter end.

The second temptation asks for a sign of Jesus’ divinity. “Since you are the Son of God, throw yourself down...” Jesus’ response comes from Deuteronomy 6:16, which reads, “Do not put the LORD your God to the test as you did at Massah.” This verse is recalling a time when the Israelites attempted to manipulate God by saying, “If you are really among us, give us water... if you really love us, give us...” Even while God was providing for them, Israel attempted to manipulate God. Today, the enemy wants irrefutable proof that Jesus is the Messiah. He asks for a Superman-style sign. He tempts Jesus by misappropriating Scripture and quoting from Psalms that have nothing to do with suicidal behaviors, but rather have to do with God’s loving provision for humanity. The temptation, “If you really are, then do...” is one that is familiar to the nation of Israel and to us today. We, too, want a provider God. We all tempt God, “God, if you really exist, give me... do for me... fix me... heal me...” Whereas Israel fails and tries to manipulate God, Jesus remains faithful by interpreting Scripture rightly. “Do not tempt God!” Do not manipulate God. Do not say, “God, if you really love me...” Jesus the Christ, remains obedient to God by embracing fully his humanity, even when an appeal to his divinity would have been appropriate in his case. He was, after all, the Son of God.

In the third temptation, the devil says, “All this I give you if you worship me”. Once again, Jesus responds by saying, “Away with you, Satan, for it is written...” Then he paraphrases Deuteronomy 6:13: “The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.” Once again, this recalls the event when the Israelites carved for themselves golden calves and false gods in the wilderness. They looked and reflected on the prosperity of other nations and asked in their hearts, “Why them and not us?” Could it be that whom you worship determines how much prosperity you get in life? If this is so, maybe the nations were on to something. Perhaps they too could control their future by creating or adopting provider-gods, fertility gods,

harvest-gods, prosperity-gods. In an ironic twist, they move away from the Creator God and become creators of gods. They failed in their ultimate test of obedience, which is none other than to trust God when nothing makes sense at all. To still trust God when we are gripped by the depths of despair. To believe that God has a wider lens through which he sees the entire picture, and that our current situation is not the end of the story.

To believe and trust God at times of absolute darkness requires real courage. Whereas the courage of the Israelites failed and they worshiped idols, the New Israel, Jesus of Nazareth refuses to worship anyone or anything other than God. He gets the nation unstuck! They can now move forward in their relationship with God. The experience of disobedience doesn't have to control their lives anymore. The Son of God is faithful for all of us. As the New Adam and New Israel, Jesus of Nazareth fulfills all righteousness on the nation's behalf. Plain and simple, in Christ Israel is finally obedient, and thus freed from the chains of disobedience that kept it stuck.

How about us? How are we stuck? What are our temptations today? I believe we are tempted with good things, but the culture convinces us that these things are all there is, they are ends in themselves. Physical comfort (food, clothing, shelter...) are all there is and nothing else matters. Fame, recognition, adulation are all there is and nothing else matters. Unlimited power, control, dominion, and status are all there is and nothing else matters. The list is unlimited. We are tempted with good things God has given us as gifts, but these things now become weaponized against us. We are led to believe that if we just more we would be just fine without God. More money and resources, more fame and popularity, more power and control. More, more, more! This unquenchable desire for more is the real enemy, and as we grow in our self-sufficiency, we become more and more distant from God and from others.

The good news for us today is that Jesus conquers all temptations! He did it for his nation and he does it for us. He gets us unstuck! No attack and no temptation can ever overtake us. Trust in Jesus and don't be afraid!