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Sermon: Revelation not Temptation

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

February 26, 2023

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Many years ago, living in Scotland, when the weather was nice on weekend or day when children were in need of extra entertainment, not far from our house was Craigmillar Castle. As far as castles go, Craigmillar will not be found on most postcards though it had nice grounds and park estate surrounding it. It was probably on the jayvee circuit of Scottish castles, but visitors could climb multiple staircases to the old banquet hall and look out over the city and explore all over the grounds. It was a good place to spend a couple of hours on an outing especially to burn off some energy. One of the claims to fame of Craigmillar Castle is that in the royal courts need to move from castle to castle in order to maintain sanitation and hygiene and to not wear out the servants in one locale, Craigmillar housed Mary Queen of Scots and her court for a brief period of time. In fact, in the semi-ruins of Craigmillar Castle there was a small plaque on an entrance to a series of chambers alerting visitors that this section would have been where royalty were housed and there was even a small marker indicating one specific room was likely to be where Mary Queen of Scots would have stayed. I remember

looking at the room with the thick stone walls and the remains of a fire place and a small cubby area for a privy that opened out to face out the back of the castle, and I remember thinking to myself at that moment, that I would rather be a poor graduate student in the 21st century than Scottish royalty in the 16th century. History sometimes tricks us into thinking otherwise, but as philosophical theologian Diogenes Allen reminds us: ‘none of us is hungry. We have food for our breakfast that even a king couldn’t have had five hundred years ago,’ and yet he also reminds us that such progress and capacity to provide cannot fill us. He continues: ‘we consume and consume and consume, and we learn the hard way—if we learn at all—that we cannot be satisfied this way. We need food; it is good; yet it does not fill us.’¹ We cannot live by bread alone. Or King Cake either.

Lead us not into temptation, we pray, but our passage today kind of assumes that we are going to face temptation whether we want to or not and indeed, it is the very first thing that happens to Jesus has after his baptism here in Matthew. Even before he sets out in ministry, before he calls a

¹ Diogenes Allen, *Temptation*, 25.

community of disciples, before he ever teaches a lesson or preaches a parable, Jesus encounters temptation. And so the first Sunday of Lent, when we are trying to turn over a new leaf or prepare in our own pilgrimage of faith, we are reminded that before he set out Jesus was tempted in the wilderness when he felt weak, that Jesus was tempted in the desert when he was hungry and thirsty, that Jesus was tempted to take a short-cut or become something other than he was called to be. Matthew tells us specifically that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Lent begins with temptation. But the weird thing about this passage on temptation, in addition to Jesus' ability and power to endure it, is that Jesus contradicts everything we thought was true about God. I mean, why shouldn't God be like these temptations, filling our bellies full and taking care of our appetites and desires. Why shouldn't God take care of that? Won't that make us whole and complete us? Just satisfy all our material needs...isn't that what God is for? God has special powers and should fulfill all our desires. God is in the business of making us all happy and satisfying all our needs. Okay, then when about the next temptation? If you are the Son of God, jump off the building so you can show how

powerful you are...a similar question is asked of Jesus by one of the criminals crucified beside him...if you are King of the Jews, save yourself, and us. God should be able to show off special powers and perform miraculous certain deeds on demand. These seem like kind of no-brainer divine powers, what any deity worth its salt would do, so what in the world would Jesus have against such powers, and why are they seen as temptations rather than valued parts of Jesus' divine arsenal? A God who can satisfy all our desires and whims, a God who can impress us with pyrotechnic powers to impress us and our friends, and a God who has the power to reign over all the kingdoms of the world. World domination. Isn't that what God is all about, anyway, reigning where'er the sun and showing all the would-be rulers who is boss and exercising full authority and power over all the kingdoms of the world. Don't we believe Jesus' kingdom is above and beyond and over the kingdoms of the world? Why not accept all that?

There are probably lots of reasons to reject this offers, first because they are not anyone else's to give and because asking Jesus to prove himself is not the way he reveals himself as God nor is it the way he believes human flourishing before

God comes to fulfillment. In trying to explain the miracle of the incarnation and also the counterintuitive nature of God, the 19th century Danish philosopher tells the story of a king who falls in love with a poor maiden. He could go into her village and awe everyone there and make her an instant celebrity by rescuing her and bringing her back to his large castle and making her his queen, a la Cinderella, but he realizes doing that would violate her dignity as a person and make her into something she is not. He did not fall in love with the queen after all but the poor humble maiden from the village. That won't work. The next option is to dress up as a humble peasant and go to her village in disguise so that he can meet her on the same level and then win her favor, reveal his true nature and whisk her back to the castle and live happily ever after. But the more he thinks about it, that won't work either, because he would be violating his own integrity and disguising his nature by pretending to be something he is not. That won't work either. Finally he realizes that there is only one option. He will have to literally forfeit his kingdom

and his authority and his status as king and literally become poor and enter this maiden's life, not pretending to be poor or peasant, but actually becoming one. And that is what the King does, risking everything so that the maiden will see him as he really is. We can certainly hear echoes of this secular parable in Philippians chapter 2:

5 Let the same mind be in you that was^a in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

8 he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

But I wonder if our real problem with this passage, is not that Jesus faced these temptations or that we struggle with these particular temptations, though I am sure we all do, but our real problem with this passage is that God would take a pass in exercising his Godness in any of these particular ways because they are all behaviors we think God should have and they are all ways we think God should act. And in Jesus Christ, God refuses to be a God who acts like a genie, showering us with material goods or providing for our every need, desire, and want. God refuses this kind of false divinity, not because God is a sadist, but because God knows us better than we know ourselves, and knows we can have everything we ever wanted and still be unhappy or unfulfilled, and perhaps God also knows that a fully human life is one that pursues and lives out its God-given calling, not one that simply satisfies all its hungers and fills all its needs. God rejects the option of helicopter parent or snowplow parent, instead, encouraging us to live out our God-given calling to

the best of our ability rather than chasing after immediate self-gratification.

A favorite church mission project of mine is the Grassmarket Community Project in Edinburgh, Scotland, an attempt to support vulnerable people in the community, not mainly through feeding them or housing them or addressing their immediate needs, but by meeting them where they are, usually in some form of addiction or self-medication, surrounding them with a community that cares about them, and then also surrounding them with people in that community who are gifted at wood working or tartan weaving or catering for events and who are happy to share their love and also pass on skills that might help the clients see that they have gifts given to them by God and skills they could but to use in service to their neighbor. In hearing the minister describe this form of social entrepreneurship, he talked about that many programs and government aid have helped create ways to warehouse people, but warehousing people may serve society or keep people from bothering us, but warehousing

them does not address their vocation, their calling, the God-given gifts we believe each person has been given. One of the church's roles in our world, he reminded us, is less about helping to warehouse people and more about helping them discover their God-given gifts and help them put them to use in this world. God refuses to be in the warehousing business or the religious sedative business, just kind of giving us material security and keeping us happy, but God is in the vocation business, calling us to become more than we can see in ourselves and calling us to live in ways that may challenge our material security and comfort.

Okay what does the second temptation tell us about God then? Perhaps even more counterintuitive than the first, the second temptation tells us that God is not here to give us the religious benefits package. So often modern religion is packaged as a commercial entity, with Jesus, you get the Cadillac religious benefits plan, so if you know what's good for you, you better purchase it or pray for it or do a, b, and c, in order to acquire. Weirdly, it becomes less about Jesus and

more about what Jesus has acquired for us or what we get in the deal. And in this second temptation, God is basically saying if all you are interested in 'your salvation' or 'getting something' or you see faith primarily in terms of 'what's in it for me,' then my way of being God is going to completely confound you and probably drive you crazy. God is more interested in showing us in his own life a way of living that will challenge us, change us, lift us, form us, captivate us, attract us, and include us, than in selling us salvation on demand or some kind of premium religious benefits package. Jesus rejects salvation as the central purpose of his coming and invites us to be challenged, mesmerized, and changed by his life rather than some kind of salvation version of a time share presentation.

The last thing Jesus reveals to us about God is God's version of power which is so subtle and nearly visible and under the radar compared to the kinds of power and success we assume matter and that we often lust for, fixate on, and which to possess. God so loves the world by rejecting the offer

to rule over it by brute force, to rule it by domination and lavish splendor, and instead rules it on God's own terms with a kind of subversive power that always fools the movers and shakers and weak and ineffectual and yet shows that forfeiting that kind of power is its own power and that choosing to rule from weakness, from a cross, from a humility and courage that those in power always mistake as soft and inconsequential and not able to do much or up to much. But that is when Jesus, and God for that matter, are at their best, and in spite of this seeming rejection of all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, Jesus finds a way to be called Lord and King of Kings on his own terms, even as his life and existence are spent in self-giving and using a very left-handed form of power and love that enact our allegiance not through force but a beauty and grace and love that will not let us go. We become a part of God's life and God's purposes in the world, not because of what we get out of it, but because we cannot help it. Ultimately, these temptations are not about keeping us on the straight and narrow, but introducing us to a

God who whose whole being undermines, rejects, shatters,
and ultimately reshapes, reconfigures, and resurrects our
understanding of God, and in so doing, reshapes,
reconfigures, and resurrects, our own humanity, too. Amen.