

# *The Tempter*

*1<sup>st</sup> in Lenten Series:*

*Heart to Heart Talks with Jesus*

from the pulpit of  
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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March 1, 2020

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

<sup>15</sup>The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. <sup>16</sup>And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup>but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” <sup>3</sup>Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” <sup>2</sup>The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup>but God

said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’“<sup>4</sup> But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die;<sup>5</sup> for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

<sup>6</sup>So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.<sup>7</sup> Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.<sup>2</sup> He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.<sup>3</sup> The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”<sup>4</sup> But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,<sup>6</sup> 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.’”<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor;<sup>9</sup> and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

This year's gospel readings for the season of Lent, all contain one on one conversations with Jesus. Today Jesus meets up with the great Tempter, and in the coming weeks we will explore his conversations with Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the man born blind, and his good friend Martha just after the death of her brother Lazarus.

I've chosen to call this series *Heart to Heart Talks with Jesus*, because each of these conversations goes deep. They ask probing questions about who Jesus is, who we are in relationship to God through him, and how does that relationship help us journey through these unsettled times with a sense of belonging, and purpose and direction.

So we begin today, where we often begin our journey through Lent toward Easter – in the wilderness. After forty days of Jesus being alone and fasting, along comes an intriguing conversation partner. If we are focusing on the *Heart to Heart* conversation we find here, we have to ask – with whom, exactly, is Jesus speaking? Matthew gives us three descriptors: the Devil, the Tempter, and Satan.

Because the word devil can conjure up images of a creepy reddish creature with a tail and a pitchfork, it's helpful to know what the word originally meant. The Greek noun comes from two words which taken together mean “to throw over.” In its broader usage then, devil, comes to mean “one who attacks, misleads, deceives, diverts, discredits or slanders.” When the devil is addressed directly, Jesus calls it “Satan,” which literally means “adversary.”<sup>1</sup>

With those connotations taken together, I like to hold on to the name Tempter, because in Matthew's version of this wilderness scene, this adversary seeks to throw Jesus off balance by tempting him to forsake his identity as the human Son of God. Jesus is being tempted to be someone other than who he really is. Like Adam and Eve in the

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<sup>1</sup> Harper's Bible Dictionary.

Garden of Eden, who were tempted to eat a forbidden fruit in order to become more like God, here the Tempter tries to persuade Jesus to assume power that is beyond his human grasp. There is not a prize the Tempter can throw at Jesus that will cause him to forsake his full investment in our human condition.

Matthew, the gospel writer most intent on connecting the Christian story to that of the ancient Hebrew people, describes the temptations so as to make sure we understand they are not particular to Jesus. Out there in the wilderness, Jesus faces that which all human beings have wrestled with since the beginning of time. The three temptations cover the range of possibilities from self-sufficiency to religious power to political conquest. Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness for forty days parallels the Hebrews' forty years in the wilderness after the Exodus. Jesus also undergoes precisely the same tests in the same sequence as the ancient Israelites.

First, Jesus is tempted in hunger. After fasting all that time, the Tempter said, "If you are the son of God, turn these stones to bread." Remember how hungry the Israelites got out in the wilderness? They even begged to go back to Egypt where, while in slavery, they at least had food to eat. They were tempted to turn away from the God who had rescued them from slavery, until God sent them manna from heaven for food.

Jesus' second temptation is about religious power, putting God to the test. This time the Tempter tells Jesus to throw himself off the roof of the Temple to see if God will rescue him. Remember how the Hebrews complained of their thirst in the wilderness and tested God to quench it, until Moses struck the rock with his staff and the water flowed.

Jesus' third temptation is about false worship for the purpose of worldly gain. The Tempter took him to the top of the mountain, showed him all the world saying, "Worship me and I will give it all to you."

Remember when Moses stayed up on Mount Sinai in the clouds with God for so long the people grew anxious, impatient, and made the Golden Calf? They took off all their jewelry, and melted it down and poured the gold into a mold, so that they could have a god like other gods, one they could carry around, a little god always close by, and clearly visible instead of a living God shrouded in holiness. Just like the Israelites, Jesus is tempted to worship a false and much smaller god. These three temptations, you see, represent basic, classic themes that continue to confront us as individuals and the church as a whole.

The Tempter's heart to heart talk with Jesus, while trying to lure him to deny his human nature is also meant to instruct us. Jesus is human as we are human and here – at the beginning of his ministry, he models for us the need to depend on God, to remember that life itself and all its treasures come from God.

Jesus was a person – flesh and blood – and was tempted as we are tempted everyday to forget that God is God, that we eat by God's hand alone, that we are called to trust and not put God to the test, because our God is a living God, and we are nothing apart from that reality. Jesus' temptations draw him close to the real experiences of all human beings. Give up your dependence on God, the Tempter says to Jesus, even as we are constantly tempted to think we can make it on our own – through our own whatever; economic security, or fierce independence, or bright intelligence, or any alluring acquiescence to the culture around us.

As one commentary puts it: “The testing of Jesus, the testings of Israel before him, and the testing of the church today are not primarily temptations to *do* what we would really like to do, but know we should not; they are temptations to *be* someone other than who God calls us to be, to deny that we are God's children.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, p. 38.

Roberta Bondi, longtime church historian at Emory's Candler School of Theology, wrote a little book called *Nick the Cat*. She tells the story of Nick, "the most amazingly eccentric, lovable cat" she has ever known. Nick had simply appeared in the driveway behind Roberta Bondi's house, became a member of the family for a while, and then disappeared just as quietly under a neighbor's bush. And in the meantime, Nick the Cat helped her connect with her earthy, dependent, human nature when she most needed to.

The subtitle of the book is *Christian Reflections on the Stranger*, and this church historian uses her experience with Nick the Cat to reflect on the relationship we modern Christians have with God – in God's creation. She calls into question the sometimes shallow talk about spirituality these days. Talk about spirituality sometimes gets too – up there, out there, somewhere, and tries to connect us to an amorphous God – without shape or form, a God who wishes us only goodness and wellbeing but a God who demands little of us. Bondi – who is quite honest about her own personal struggles with depression and anxiety – reminds her readers how spirituality is absolutely grounded in our earthly humanity, our creature-li-ness. She argues that perhaps we get too comfortable with our affirmations that "God is Spirit," and that – religiously speaking, we are mostly spiritual beings. Her concern is that if we forget the undeniable fact that we are animals, we put not only ourselves but the world around us in real danger.

The name Adam means earthling, Eve means life – we are Adam and Eve, all of us, Living Earthlings. It is true that we are also spiritual beings, but only because God breathed into our bodies and equipped us to live in a material world, which "we know and relate to through our senses every bit as much as through our minds." As if to counter any temptation we might face, as Jesus faced – that we are self-sufficient, that we can be spiritually independent, or that we can get by on a plethora of tiny little gods of worldly power, Bondi writes: "For Christians to act as though we are meant to be only "spiritual" is to deny the reality of what Christians have always believed about the

Incarnation, namely, that when God came to reveal Godself most fully to us, God did it not through intellectual arguments, or prayer, or dreams. God came among us as a human being of flesh and blood, an animal with senses and appetites, birth, joy, suffering, and death just like the rest of us... Having seen God in Jesus Christ, we are once more able to value the whole of creation as an expression of God.”<sup>3</sup>

To value the earth, and all its creatures, particularly its human creatures is the call of God placed upon our hearts through Jesus Christ. In this formative heart to heart talk between Jesus and the Tempter, the primary outcome is Jesus maintained his humanity. And his humanity brings all of us very close to the heart of God. Not because God is up there, out there, somewhere, but because when we are in the wilderness moments of our days, when we are really famished – for the things that give us life, Jesus says, “I am with you, with you in this.”

AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> Roberta Bondi, *Nick the Cat: Christian Reflections on the Stranger*, p. 10