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Matthew 4:1-11

*The Test*

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Matthew 4:1-11 The Message

Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it. Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test: “Since you are God’s Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread.” Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: “It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God’s mouth.” For the second test the Devil took him to the Holy City. He sat him on top of the Temple and said “Since you are God’s Son, jump.” The Devil goaded him by quoting Psalm 91: “He has placed you in the care of angels. They will catch you so that you won’t so much as stub your toe on a stone.” Jesus countered with another citation from Deuteronomy: “Don’t you dare test the Lord your God.” For the third test, the Devil took him to the peak of a huge mountain. He gestured expansively, pointing out all the earth’s kingdoms, how glorious they all were. Then he said, “They’re yours—lock, stock, and barrel. Just go down on your knees and worship me, and they’re yours.” Jesus’ refusal was curt: “Beat it, Satan!” He backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.” The Test was over. The Devil left. And in his place, angels! Angels came and took care of Jesus’ needs.

The first Sunday in Lent begins with a scripture about temptation, sin, right and wrong, and how we respond to each. So, just give me 10 minutes and I will be able to clear up all of your questions about these issues.

A mother was teaching her 3-year old daughter the Lord's Prayer. At bedtime, she repeated after her mother the lines from the prayer. Finally, she decided to say it alone. Here mom listened with pride as she carefully said each word, right up to the end of the prayer: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us some email.

Well, if that doesn't make it all clear, let's look at what Susanna Wesley had to say in order to clarify things. Susanna Wesley was the mother of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. Susanna had 25 children, 9 of whom died as infants. Every night Susanna would talk to each child alone, on Monday she would talk with Molly, on Tuesday with Hetty, Wednesday with Nancy, Thursday with Jacky, Friday with Patty, Saturday with Charles. One time Susanna’s husband was in London defending a friend against charges of heresy, when another preacher was sent. The man’s sermons were always about repaying debts. So, Susanna started to have family services Sunday afternoons. They would sing a psalm and then Susanna would read either her husband's or father's sermons. The local people began to ask if they could attend and at one point there were over 200 people who would attend Susanna’s Sunday afternoon service while the Sunday morning service dwindled to nearly nothing (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susanna\_wesley#cite\_note-5).

Susanna Wesley defined sin to her young son, John with these words, "Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, and takes off the relish of spiritual things--that to you is sin." Remember these words, "Whatever obscures your sense of God and takes off the relish of spiritual things - that is sin".

Augustine in the year 398 wrote these words, “Sin comes when we take a perfectly natural desire or longing or ambition and try desperately to fulfill it without God. Not only is it sin, it is a perverse distortion of the image of the Creator in us. All these good things, and all our security, are rightly found only and completely in God.” Most of the time without really any real thought I do what I want to do and I make poor choices. As Paul says in Romans 7:15 “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

As Christians we believe that sin has power - a deadly power – that comes from evil; but we also believe that faith has power - a life giving power that comes from God. In our lives we experience a struggle between these two powers, and even when we have faith in the God of life we experience temptation. We feel desire and live through events that test our faith and seek to lure us away from God and have us serve evil instead.

We are tempted to give in to despair - the despair that nothing we can do will make a difference; the despair that says that there is no help or hope for us or for our world. But my friends, we have within us one who is stronger than the world, one who is greater than the tempter, one who has triumphed over evil both in life - as we see in the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, and in death - as we see in the cross - and again three days later - in the resurrection. It’s so easy to dwell too much on the negative side of things and to see the problems that exist all round us - but not see the good news that also exists all round us. That good news is the salvation that is offered to us all without condition or qualification.

I have a friend who makes a note of funny signs. One of her favorites found at a waterpark was, “deep water at end of ride, you have gone too far to exit, ask lifeguard for assistance.” At the entrance to a hotel swimming pool on the French Riviera she found a sign that says: "Swimming is forbidden in the absence of a Savior." Not only swimming but life itself should not be lived in the absence of a Savior. We have a Savior - one who remembers who we are - one who loves us as a parent loves their children. This Savior has ventured into the same waters that we swim in each day and has battled the currents and fought the foes and shown that he is able and shown that we - when we swim with him - are able as well. Our Savior remembers who we are - and he loves us - and seeks the best for us. He knows that we are weak swimmers - that we from time to time we will flounder and thrash - and sink. He knows the waters we are in - and that is why he has been appointed the judge of the living and the dead. Our Savior is our judge. He does not judge us for the sake of condemning us - he takes no delight in catching us in our sin he has no joy when we hurt ourselves or hurt others - rather he reaches out to us - he calls to us - he seeks to guide us and help us - and like all good parents – he forgives us and does all that he can to make sure that we start each day new and fresh and bathed in love.

Kenneth Filkins has caught this beautifully in a poem entitled "The Pit." Let me share just a little bit of it with you: Visualize if you will a great pit - a pit perhaps of your own making – or perhaps one made for you by others - visualize a pit into which you have fallen and cannot get out of. Filkins writes: A man fell into a pit and he couldn't get out.

A SELF-PITYING PERSON said: "You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit."

A NEWS REPORTER said: "Could I have the exclusive story on your pit?"

A CIVIL SERVANT said: "Have you paid your taxes on that pit?"

A CITY INSPECTOR said: "Do you have a permit for that pit?"

A REALIST said: "That's a pit."

An IDEALIST said: "The world shouldn't have pits."

An OPTIMIST said: "Things could be worse."

A PESSIMIST said: "Things will get worse."

But Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit.

A pit is an awful place to be -particularly the pit created by the power of sin and temptation. But there is one who will help. There is one who has managed to avoid the pit and who seeks to help us out of the pit. His name is Jesus - and he lives and reigns with God - and with God he is able, able to help, able to save, able to redeem. Not only is he able, he is willing. And not only is he willing, he has already acted to save us, acted to bring to the world a new day. Acted to bring to each of us a new life. May we not dwell in the pit, may we not accept the pit. May we instead reach out our hand to the one who has stretched out his hands for us, and who still reaches out for us today. May we reach out to Christ, and through Christ, may we reach out to others around us and let them know that there is a better life to be had, a life that is given freely to all who desire it. During this time of Lent let us tune into the voice of God. May we commit ourselves to give God first place in our lives so that God’s concerns may be ours.