

There's a lot going on in this passage, and we're going to need to read it with care if we hope to hear what it has to say to us. Because there's a lot going on in our community, country, and world right now as well. A lot that is important, has consequences, and just plain matters. And make no mistake, God's word has something to say about it. All of it. So, let's get to it.

First off, I think it's important to note and admit that the early church and the four Evangelists – the people who wrote our Gospels – weren't totally sure what to do with the story of Jesus' temptation. Mark, the first of the four Gospels to be written, only gives the scene we just heard a single verse and sentence: "Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." Yah, that's it, almost as if Mark knows he can't get away without including this part of the story but really, really doesn't want to dwell on it. And John, the last of the four Gospels, doesn't mention it at all. John simply can't imagine that Jesus, the eternal Word and Son of God, could possibly be susceptible to temptation, and so it has no place in the story he tells.

The temptation story is uncomfortable because, well, while we confess in the Nicene Creed that Jesus is both "fully God" and "fully human," truth be told, we're a little more comfortable with the "fully God" part, and so the idea of Jesus being tempted – like really struggling to keep faith – is a little hard to hear, and so Mark makes just a passing reference and John omits it altogether.

Matthew and Luke, however, written in between Mark and John – and in this sense the well-adjusted middle children of the Gospels – and, yes, I say that as a middle-child – Matthew and Luke portray Jesus' temptations in some detail.

Why? Because they believe in that in the story of Jesus' temptation we see the history of the world encapsulated in the experiences of this man, and that in the account of his refusal to give into temptation, we hear nothing less than the good news that in God's only Son there is hope for all humanity.

The people who lived in the ancient world, you see, tended to believe that history was cyclical, that the great themes and moments of history tended to repeat themselves. That may sound a little odd to us, because we tend to have a more linear view of history, seeing the events of the past and present in an orderly march, always forward, always into the future. But the ancients – including those who wrote our New Testament – felt that while there may be all

kinds of distinct events, none of them were truly singular, as the great themes of what it means to be human – to live, to hope, to love, to struggle, to fail, to die – these themes characterized not just our individual lives as people but also colored our collective humanity and were repeated throughout history.

And so, as Luke and Matthew write – and this year we’re focusing particularly on St. Matthew’s account – as they tell their story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, they are keenly aware of two episodes of Israel’s history that are being repeated here and now in the life of Jesus.

The first is the story of the temptation of Adam and Eve, told in Genesis, a story you may remember. Adam and Eve are created to be equal partners in tending the world, God’s garden. They are given tremendous blessing and liberty but also have limits set for them – in particular, that they may eat of the fruit of every tree in the garden except that one that gives them perfect and complete knowledge. And that’s when the Tempter enters the story, questioning God’s command and inviting *them* to question their relationship with God. And Adam and Eve falter and fail, mistrusting God’s promises and taking matters into their own hands. And so, when the people St. Matthew originally wrote for / hear the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Tempter, they immediately think of Adam and Eve and the story of their fall.

The second story is signaled by Matthew’s use of a word also used by Mark and Luke, because Jesus isn’t just tempted, he’s tempted “in the wilderness.” And that word, “wilderness,” always symbolizes a place of testing and trial and challenge and repentance. It’s in the wilderness, after all, that Israel wandered for forty years.

I don’t know if we remember that story quite as well, so by way of reminder: God has rescued Israel from the Egyptians, leading them across the Red Sea toward the promised land. God has given them the Ten Commandments to guide their life together and has sustained them with manna and more as they journey to a new land, one flowing with milk and honey. And when they are on the brink of entering into the promised land, the Israelites falter, doubting God’s promises and saying that, when push came to shove, they’d rather not take on the challenges of settling a new land – especially when there were already people living there – but would rather take their chances on their own. And so God grants them their wish, saying that rather than enter the promised land they will wander in the wilderness for forty years until every member of that stubborn

and faithless generation dies. God will take their children and grandchildren into the land of promise, but not those who refused to trust in God. And so, when Matthew's original audience hears him tell a story about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness for forty days, they immediately go back to the story of Israel's failure and wandering.

Now, as distinct as these two stories are, they have one profound thing in common: Adam and Eve, and later the nation of Israel, falters and fails when they no longer put their trust in God. Likewise, "trust" is the dominant theme in the story of Jesus' temptation. Notice that the Tempter begins the first two temptations with the same words, "If you are the Son of God..." "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread," and "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself off the Temple." The third temptation is like it, inviting Jesus to abandon his claim as son of God and worship the devil instead in exchange for all worldly power. Three times the Tempter attempts to sow doubt about whether Jesus really is God's Son. And to each of these temptations, Jesus responds by reaffirming his trust in God.

Now, keep in mind again that history, for Matthew, is cyclical, repeating the great themes of humanity over and over again. And that cycle, when you think about stories like Adam and Eve's fall and the failure of the Israelites – not to mention so many others like the story of the golden calf or Israel's rejection of God's prophets – that story is not just cyclical but pretty dismal and, even more, hopeless, because it shows that, when things get hard, we regularly falter in our trust, fail to keep faith, and take matters into our own hands, often through violence.

But Jesus is different. Jesus not only refuses temptation here but also again at the end of the story when he is betrayed, denied, tried, and crucified unjustly. He doesn't come down off the cross, even though some tempt him to do so. He does not resort to violence, even though his own disciples want him to. Both here and throughout Matthew's story, Jesus – called by the Apostle Paul "the Second Adam" – Jesus keeps faith, trusts God with the future, and so refuses to take matters into his own hands.

How? The easy answer would be to say, "well, because he's God's Son." And there's something to that, of course, but I think Matthew would offer a different answer.

Okay, so most of us have probably heard that the three most important words in real estate are... “location, location, location.” And I’d say the same is true of reading Scripture. So, to hear St. Matthew’s answer about how Jesus is able to keep faith, it’s vital to note that Matthew locates this story of Jesus’ temptation immediately after the story of his baptism. And so, hear the beginning of today’s story about temptation in the wilderness prefaced by the last verse of last week’s story about Jesus’ baptism: “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ Then, Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

Do see what I mean? Immediately after Jesus is baptized and hears the voice of heaven name him beloved son of God, then – and only then – is he prepared to endure wilderness and temptation. And so, I think Matthew is telling us that it’s because Jesus received his blessing and identity – to borrow the words from Pastor Freeman’s simply superb sermon last week – because Jesus received his blessing and identity in his Baptism, he can endure the wilderness and withstand the temptations hurled at him because he knows he is God’s beloved child.

And the same is true with us.

As I said earlier – and as you know so, so well – there is a lot that is going on right now in our communities, country, and world that is just plain hard. So much that it causes us to worry, even to fear, to be tempted to take matters into our own hands, and to lose confidence that God is faithful, loving, and just.

Make no mistake. We are in a period of wilderness. But also make no mistake, God is with us. And of the many gifts God has given us to help us through the wilderness and to endure the temptations hurled our way, is the blessing and identity given to Jesus at his baptism and to each of us at ours. It can be hard to remember, and that’s one big reason we come to church, to remind each other of God’s promises.

I need that. You need that. Even the giants of the faith need that. In fact, it’s said that one particular night Martin Luther invited some friends to share dinner at his home during a particularly challenging part of the Reformation and, during the meal, bemoaned the many setbacks they had recently experienced. As the night went on, Luther’s catalogue of disappointments grew longer and longer, until Luther suddenly realized that his wife, Katie, had left the table and come back dressed all in black. When Luther asked her why she had changed her

clothes, she responded, “Well, to hear you talk, dear Martin, I thought that perhaps God had died and I should dress for his funeral.” Which caused Luther to laugh at his own foolishness, to remember God promises, to get up from the table, and to get back to the ordinary and everyday tasks of preaching and teaching and trust the future of the reformation, and the world, to God.

So, as you go out into the wilderness once more to face the temptations and challenges of our day, hear these words, spoken first to Jesus at his baptism and then to us at ours, words of identity and blessing that help us face the future with courage and regard each other – all others – with compassion: “You are my child, the beloved, and with you I am well pleased.” Thanks to be God. Amen.

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