

Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSV)

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.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

For some reason, as I walked with this text the past couple of weeks, I began to see it differently than I have in the past. This is, after all, the temptation of Christ, and I found myself asking, "What would tempt Christ?" Is it likely to be the same thing that would tempt you or me? Maybe not. This is, after all, the Son of

God – I’m not sure he is going to be drawn down the road to perdition by the offer of a second helping of fried chicken or a free drink. So what might it be in these temptations that would tempt the Son of God?

The devil begins, “If you are the Son of God ...” and this is probably a clue right there. The devil doesn’t really mean *If* since the fact that Jesus is the Son of God isn’t really in any doubt between the two of them. He is really saying “*Since* you are the Son of God ...” Since you are the Son of God and you haven’t had anything to eat for 40 days, you deserve a break today. You’ve got to be hungry. Just turn these stones into hot tasty bread, gee, you really owe it to yourself, you’re special, you’re different, it’d be a snap for you.

And, you know, that’s all true. He was hungry, he was special, no one would know, it would be a snap, we know he does the water-into-wine and the “5,000 servings of fish” miracles in other connections, this is just a little bit of bread for himself.

And maybe that’s why it is such a deadly temptation for him. Because he *is* special, because he is literally on a mission from God, a mission to save all of humankind, isn’t it OK to cut a corner or two. Isn’t he entitled?

The second temptation begins the same way: “*Since* you are the Son of God ...” jump from the top of the temple and let the angels catch you. Now think about it for a second, the temple is a busy place, people coming and going. A fly-over by a squadron of angels to catch an itinerant preacher jumping from the highest tower would probably create some interest among the passersby. If you wanted to be noticed this would work.

Again, the same kind of temptation – you’re special, God regards you a special way, you’re on a mission, here to save the

world. It would be smart, the Devil tells him, instead of walking around the backwoods of Galilee telling stories if you sort of “staged an event.” Then, when you’ve gotten their attention, when they’re eating out of your hand, then tell ‘em anything you want. They’ll listen.

The final temptation is the best corner-cutter of all. Look Jesus, says the Devil, don’t even bother trying to change their minds. If you were king of the world, you could just tell them what to do and they would do it. I can set this up for you, won’t take a minute. You’d have the army behind you, think of it as “nation-building,” they’d probably even be glad to see you, you’d be a much better king than the ones they have already, you wouldn’t steal from them, you wouldn’t cheat them, you wouldn’t take their land and their taxes and their children.

And, you know, that’s all true. He would be a great king, wise, compassionate, far-sighted and most of all, he’d love his people and, in time, they’d love him.

It’s a bit of a shame the way the temptation story is written that we don’t get the feeling that Jesus is tempted at all. I think he really might have been, a little. He might have thought, this would be a lot easier than the road I know is set ahead of me. It could work, it might work, and a lot faster than what I’m going to be doing. And God loves me, God wants what’s best for me, I’m his only son and I’m special and God wouldn’t want me to just throw my life away.

Earlier I said that the things that would tempt Christ might not be the same things that the Devil would use to tempt me, but now I’m not so sure. How many preachers and religious leaders fall to the temptations that the Devil showed to Jesus? They’re special, they’re told, and so they start to believe it. They have a special relationship to God, they’ve been trained and ordained,

they wear special clothes and say special words, they change bread into body and wine into blood on a weekly basis. And so they start to think that the ordinary rules of a life of discipleship just don't apply to them.

And it's not just priests or pastors. Talk to me about good church-goers who might start to convince themselves that they don't need to go to church because they go to church meetings, that they don't need to read the bible because they don't have the time, that they don't need to give of their treasure because they give of their time. We are very fortunate here at Saint Nicholas that this kind of thinking has never caught on and we should do everything we can to make sure that it never does.

And talk to me about our political leaders – this is a political season after all. How many of them fall to the temptations that the devil showed to Jesus? How many come to believe they are special, that the ordinary rules don't apply to them, they're here to save the world after all, they have a special relationship to the people, the people chose them and trust them? Cut a corner here, shave a rule there, it's all for the greater good, after all. And they start to think they're invisible. I still think about Gary Hart, the candidate for president back in 1988 who dared the media to follow him around in order to quiet the rumors about his affairs, and two days later the media taking him up on his dare caught him on a boat with a young model, Donna Rice. Two days later! Duh! What could he have been thinking? Sadly, there are many more examples.

And talk to me about everyday people. Students who want to get stronger by taking steroids, or get more energetic by drinking power drinks, or get better grades by having someone do their term papers. Talk with me about life in the everyday work world, people improving a design or a presentation by stealing

pieces of it from someone else, or making a sale by offering a discreet gift to the purchasing agent.

You see, when we think of temptations in a trivial way as temptations to do something bad, we sell the Devil short. The real temptations, the temptations that are the hardest to resist are to do something good the easy way. The temptation to try to reform people without changing their minds and their hearts. The temptation to try to change what people do by telling them a better way to do it, or simply making them do what you want them to. The temptation to try to make change without becoming and being the change you want to make.

The temptations that are the most difficult appeal not to the worst of our nature but to the best of it. Real temptations appeal to our frustrated hopes, to our unrealized dreams, to the reality that what is very good is so very difficult to achieve. It's good to be strong, to be energetic, to get good grades. It's good to make a better design, or make a sale. It's good to bring people to God, good to become more Christ-like in our thoughts and actions. And the Devil is always there to show you the easiest and fastest and most efficient way to do it.

The temptations that the Devil showed to Christ are on display all around us, every day. At depth, one of the hardest ones is the temptation to see yourself as special. Because it's true you are special, unique, a wonderful creation, as special as Christ who was tempted the same way. But as Paul said in his letter to the Phillippians, Jesus "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited ... [but instead] humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross." For him and for us, even as special as we are, the longer, harder road of discipleship, of loving God, loving others, teaching the people and serving the world is still the straightest path. Amen.