

## THE TEMPTATIONS OF A GREAT CALLING<sup>1</sup>

Matthew 4: 1-11

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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For those of you who come from other than Baptist backgrounds, I will let you in on a little secret about Baptists: we generally know very little about Lent. For our denominational ancestors, it smacked of popery, or at least too many smells and bells! It was a high church kind of observance, and Baptists were anything but high church.

### I

Some Baptists think of Lent primarily as something you pick off your sweater! Yet even they cannot help but notice that the weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter constitute a very special time in the life of Christians everywhere. Some think of Lent as a rather morbid time of repentance and self-condemnation. Others may consider it foolish to maintain a custom reaching all the way back to the Middle Ages to smear a few ashes on your forehead and to fast during the weeks of Lent. It all seems so antiquated—so distant from our world of cyberspace and outer space. Where do we fit into such a time? Or perhaps a more apt question: where does such a time fit into our already overscheduled lives?

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Whatever else we can say about Lent, we can readily make this observation: Lent has a close association with the story of the temptations of Jesus. Matthew's gospel tells us that after his baptism, *Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And he fasted 40 days and 40 nights, and afterward he was hungry.*<sup>2</sup> There is another one of those understatement for which the Bible is famous: *...afterward he was hungry.* Forty days in the desert; forty days of Lent: there is a direct connection.

This story of the wilderness testing of Jesus is multilayered. At the deepest level lies the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent's proposal that they become like God.<sup>3</sup> Then there are the accounts of Israel's wilderness wandering for 40 years.<sup>4</sup> And surely those who first read this story would remember that Moses was with the Lord for 40 days and nights during which time he neither ate nor drank, and he was taken to a high mountain and shown all the land as far as the eye could see.<sup>5</sup> This was Matthew's way of reminding his readers that in Jesus, God raised up among his people a new Moses.

The powerful impact of this story, however, does not lie in its resonance with other ancient biblical stories. This account of the temptations of Jesus

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 4: 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3: 5.

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 8: 2.

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 34: 1-8.

speaks directly to the church, whose faithfulness is forged again and again in the desert. I call your attention to the fact that Jesus was not in the desert because he had departed from God's will. Jesus was in the desert because he was led by the Spirit. This story is not like an animated cartoon of Jesus debating some horned creature with a fiendish face who smells of sulfur. Jesus is wrestling with the will of God for his future ministry.

The possibilities are presented as three alternatives, all of which have immense potential for good. For example, there is the temptation to turn stones to bread. Well, why not? In a world of unbelievable hunger, that would truly be a wonderful gift. And the temptation to leap from the pinnacle of the temple: in a world callous to sermons, why not do something spectacular to get their attention? What's wrong with that? And the temptation to gain all the kingdoms of the world was the possibility of replacing the Roman Emperor, who as far as they were concerned, truly did govern all the kingdoms of the world. What's wrong with that?

This we know: when Jesus was baptized, he felt the call to a great vocation, and he had some difficult choices to make as he planned for his future. These temptations were not about private morality; they were about the shape and nature of his ministry. Soon he would leave the desert and go out to preach good news to the poor. He would heal the sick, reach out to the

ostracized of that society, give dignity to women, and challenge the entrenched powers that be.

He would discover that his work of compassion would be opposed immediately. Forces that traffic in human misery and reap huge profits from the poverty of others would oppose him at every turn, and the old temptations he experienced in the desert would rise again and again.

## II

The world has hardly changed. Every church engaged in the ministry of Jesus experiences opposition because there is always another team on the field. Churches that refuse to reach out to those whom society ostracizes need not worry about opposition. It is precisely those churches that extend the ministry of Jesus to the contemporary parallels to the lepers, the blind, and the crippled that are opposed.

In the year 1812 a handful of people in Worcester organized themselves into the First Baptist Church of Worcester. Like Jesus coming up dripping from baptismal waters, they heard an unmistakable voice calling this church to a great vocation. Those original members of this church were essentially no different from us. They had their lives and families and work to take up their time and attention. Their children were born and raised in this church.

Some stayed; some left. But through it all, they never lost the echo of that great calling.

The years rolled by, while each generation responded to the same great calling for their time. One of those generations built this sanctuary in which we worship. It is their gift to us and future generations. They built it to the glory of God and to provide a place for us to carry out the great calling they experienced.

Now like Jesus in the desert, we face again a time to rethink and reaffirm that calling first heard by those Worcester Baptists in 1812. Lent can be a time to tune in to that calling, to hear it again, and to make conscious decisions about how we in our generation will respond to fulfill that calling.

Our calling is great because it involves following the Way of Jesus Christ. That Way always involves temptation, and it always involves opposition. Otherwise, it would not be his Way. We have determined that our calling is to be an inclusive church. We are not an ethnic church; we are a human church. We are all God's loved and forgiven people.

That is a great calling—a calling that we, by joining this church, have contracted with God and each other to fulfill. This is a sacred contract. We will have our lean years and our years when we surge ahead. We will experience our time in the desert, and we will likewise face temptations. But

we have covenanted to order our lives together in a way that honors Christ and allows us the freedom to fulfill our great calling.

I am no seer, but I sense within our congregation what our ancestors called “a stirring of the Spirit.” Like coals being stirred in a fire, there is new light and warmth flaming up from the hearth of this congregation. There is a convergence of good will and creativity and daring that has potential for doing something great together which will help fulfill our calling for a new century of growth and service and worship.

### III

In the story before us, Jesus overcame the temptations he experienced in the desert. How? Not simply by quoting scripture, although scripture was for him an enormous source of strength. The real key to overcoming those temptations lay in his absolute refusal to try to be like God. As the Apostle Paul would later say, *Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.*<sup>6</sup>

He did not exempt himself from human frailty and human choices. The Messiah did not have a Messiah complex! He chose the path of serving, suffering, and even dying. The perennial temptation of any church is to be too fond of power, place, and privilege to follow the servant footsteps of the

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<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2: 6-7.

Savior. Churches would do well to remember that we are not perfect; we are not made up of little gods; rather, we are fully human and make human mistakes. But God uses churches like that to fulfill a great calling.

#### IV

The footnote to this great story is that the temptations of Jesus did not end in the desert. He continued to be tested, even by those he trusted the most. Remember, at one time his friend Peter encouraged Jesus to avoid the cross, and Jesus said to him, *Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.*<sup>7</sup> Temptation followed him all the way to Gethsemane.

Lent reminds us that the church cannot avoid the cross. Flannery O'Connor has a story about a little girl who loves to visit the convent and the sisters. But every time a sister hugs the little girl, the crucifix on the sister's belt gets smashed into the child's face. The gesture of love always leaves a mark.<sup>8</sup>

And with the church, gestures of love for the world always leave their mark. Our true identity is imprinted on this world. We make this journey of Lent together, and we follow the One who has already traveled this road before us, and lives to show us the Way.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 16: 23. See also Mark 8: 33.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Richard Lischer, "The Journey Begins," *The Christian Century*, Feb. 3-10, 1999.