

“Into Temptation”

It’s a strange beginning really, especially considering the elaborate buildup Matthew provides.

There was the long, convoluted and suspiciously symmetrical genealogy, stretching the point and straining the credulity to achieve its precarious sense of balance: from Abraham to David, fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the exile to the Messiah, fourteen generations. Three groups of fourteen: 3 X 2 X 7, an auspicious configuration of sacred numbers: something really important must be at hand.

Then Joseph, a righteous man but also a dreamer, stretches the understanding of righteousness to include marrying his pregnant fiancée. They’re breaking the rules here; something new, something outside the lines.

Then the strange sages traverse afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain, their improbable journey pointing to a redemptive purpose unfolding through Israel to encompass the whole world. There are terrible echoes of the Exodus as children are slaughtered and the holy refugee family first flees to and then emerges from Egypt as had their Israelite ancestors who followed Moses.

A procession of portent after portent after portent tells us something important is about to happen. It finally reaches a crescendo when the adult Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized by John, and a voice from heaven announces, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Four chapters in, it is now time for Jesus himself at last to say or do something memorable. The stage is set, the spotlights on, the microphones ready, the curtain parts... and Jesus responds to all the messianic fanfare by disappearing into the wilderness. It is a strange beginning... that is completely right.

Jesus wanders off alone—actually, not quite alone. He is led in the wilderness by the Spirit, as were his ancestors. And there, also like them, he is tested: some serious and solitary spiritual work.

Matthew tells us that Jesus’ entrance exam was administered by the Devil, a strange and mysterious figure who seems to gather more and more baggage as he rolls along through history. The name by which Jesus will address him, Satan, simply means, “adversary.” In the Old Testament, and particularly in the book of Job, Satan functions something like God’s prosecuting attorney, who accuses the so-called righteous ones and brings them to trial. At that point Satan was not yet the fallen angel and incarnation of evil he would become in the Book of Revelation; let alone the pitchfork-wielding, red-clad, goat-horned, maitre d’o’ hell into which he would evolve. For today let’s simply think of him as a tester, and remember Fiorello

LaGuardia's famous quotation: "The Devil comes when you're terribly tired and suggests something perfectly reasonable that you know you should refuse."

As Jesus is about to begin his ministry, amid the crushing surge of messianic expectation, some key issues will need to be worked-out. Oddly enough, this confrontation turns out to be a controversy over the meaning of scripture, the primary spiritual battleground being the book of Deuteronomy.

The testing takes place in the wilderness, the place in Israel's history where people meet God. The patriarchs wandered and sojourned there, seemingly doing all right in the desert, but getting into trouble when they ran into folks in the settled places. When Israel crossed the Red Sea, God's encore involved not a cruise to the land of milk and honey but a forty year trek, a generation's worth of testing in which Israel was tried and found wanting. In the wilderness God's people were dependent upon God at each moment. They lived on manna from heaven, the daily bread of the wilderness, with the occasional protein supplement of quail meat. Water came from the very rocks of the desert, and each day consisted of trusting once again that the necessities of life could be found.

Forty days and nights is a good biblical number for a long time. It was long enough to generate a flood in the time of Noah. Moses spent forty days and nights on Mt. Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments from God. Forty years was a normal lifespan and the period of Israel's wanderings. Our season of Lent is forty days, plus Sundays. Forty is a big enough number to lose count, big enough to seem endless. Fasting weakens resolve and distorts perspective. Jesus, it would seem, is ripe for the Tempter's perfectly reasonable suggestions about how to begin his ministry.

Here's a thought: why not turn the stones of the desert into bread? The people are hungry, and feeding them would be a good thing, right? In gratitude, they would surely follow, and then they would be a receptive—in fact, captive and dependent—congregation. Right? Not quite: bread is not by itself the kind of sustenance Jesus came to bring.

Then how about this: a spectacular display of authority will get everybody's attention. Go to the top of the Temple—the biggest building in Israel—throw yourself down toward the plaza below and (this is the part I love) just before you go—splat!—on the pavement some angels swoop you up. Great, huh? But Jesus will not dazzle people into following him. A quick fix of signs and wonders may yield fascination, but not faith. Besides, is that really what that eagle's wings psalm—Psalm 91—is about?

All right, then let's call out the cavalry. Look at all the kingdoms of the world. They're clamoring for a warrior-king messiah; let's give them one! If they don't want to worship properly, we can just command it, you and I, just as the Roman emperors took to doing. Isn't it fascinating that political power seems to be the Devil's to bestow? But that is not the kingdom and the power and the glory Jesus has come to proclaim.

It is just possible—depending on your view of Jesus—that Jesus himself at this point does not yet know how the Reign of God comes; but he knows it is not through bread, or circuses, or soldiers. Tiny seeds, subtle stories, subversive deeds of life and love, selfless acts of sacrifice: these will be prove to be far more lasting.

The Devil departs; but we have the sense that there will be other temptations for Jesus.

So... what about your own times in the wilderness? Do you find yourself going there, too, led by the Spirit and tested by the Tempter? I do. In fact, I suspect that for me the times when I do not experience temptation are simply the times when I have surrendered the struggle altogether.

It happens most often late at night, in the dim light and distorted sense of time of the wee small hours, when sleep moves suddenly from being elusive to being unattainable. I get out of bed, determined not to try to solve the problems of the world for at least a few minutes. Options are few: blunt the imagination with ever-present infomercials proclaiming the gospel according to great abs. (There must be an awful lot of us sitting up in our bathrobes, eating chocolate cake and watching those things!) I can do endless pushups with my thumb, or distract myself by reading fluff.

But sometimes none of that deflection or distraction works, and the old internal accuser flails away. Inventory time: broken relationships, missed opportunities, failed initiatives, lists of people I've let down in one way or another, real or imagined. If only I had done this... or hadn't done that... or if only I really had the courage of my convictions, or had any convictions at all. In the bleak and featureless landscape of the wilderness, every failing stands out bold and casts a long shadow.

Jacob, we are told, wrestled all night long and became a different person. Jesus did this for forty days and nights. The wilderness, when we think about it, is a place we know, much as we may try to forget sometimes.

Jesus even taught us to pray about it: "give us this day our daily bread," just enough for today. "Lead us not into temptation," we pray, because these times of testing are difficult and serious, and nothing we would want to take on just for extra credit. But when we do come to the time of trial, "deliver us from evil;" or rather, "deliver us from the Evil One," as some translations of the Lord's Prayer read. Daily bread... testing... deliver us from evil... we know this place better than we thought.

Here the accuser tries to convince us that bread for today isn't enough security; that forgiveness for the likes of us isn't really in the picture. Here means and ends blur together and dulling the senses with TV seems vastly preferable to an endless dark night of the soul.

We know this place; which is exactly why it matters so much that Jesus went there first. All the people we regard as spiritual models have been there, again and again. Read their writings: Augustine and Luther, Gandhi and King all tell us of their wilderness times of doubt and testing. Madeline L'Engle has been there, and Anne

Lamott. Like all their spiritual forebears, the wilderness is where they went to meet God.

Things look different in the light of day, to be sure. But our times in the wilderness are nevertheless defining moments where despair meets grace, where doubt encounters hope, where the truth of our failings is met by the freedom of God's forgiveness. Before he did anything else, Jesus went to the wilderness. And again and again throughout his ministry he went off to lonely places, wilderness places, to pray, to ask each day for the daily bread of God that means spiritual life for all of us.

So as today we observe the first Sunday in the wilderness journey that is Lent, our time of preparation for the celebration of Easter, we come to the table to remember and affirm that no time of trial or testing—however bleak or lonely it feels—is beyond the reach of God's forgiving love.

Give us this day our daily bread... lead us not into temptation... deliver us from the evil one.

Amen

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