

Matthew 4:1-11

4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil.

4:2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished.

4:3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

4:4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

4:5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,

4:6 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.'"

4:7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

4:8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory,

4:9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

4:10 Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

4:11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Sermon: Beyond Wilderness

Today's text is strange.

For starters, we're just beginning our 40-day journey through Lent (47 days if you count your Sundays). But in today's text, Jesus has already completed his journey. He's spent 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. And he's famished.

Keep reading. Stranger things await. Satan makes an appearance.

And Satan, the tempter of all tempters, sees an opening: "Let's see what Jesus is made of." Satan seeks to tempt Jesus through three separate actions.

First: "Prove who you say you are," says Satan. "Use your power to turn these stones to bread."

"No thanks," says Jesus.

Second: "Prove who you say you are," says Satan. "Use your power to levitate like a supernatural being."

"No thanks," says Jesus.

Third: "Look around," says Satan. "All of this can be yours: mountains and kingdoms – the whole world and all its splendor. Just bow down and worship me."

"No thanks," says Jesus.

Keep reading. More strange things occur.

After three refusals, Satan vanishes. The angels come. And it seems they bring Jesus some bread. Jesus is no longer famished, no longer weary.

So...what are we to make of this strange story? And what are we to make of this strange Lenten season? And what relevance do story and season have for the tables we're invited to? The one we shared this past week on Ash Wednesday, the one we'll share at potluck in two weeks, and in our sanctuary again in three weeks, and once more on Maundy Thursday?

For starters, the author of Matthew casts Jesus in the tradition of Moses. You'll remember that Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights receiving God's law on Mt. Sinai. Moses, too, must contend with demonstrations of power. Moses lives in a Show-Me world, but he follows a God who doesn't believe in demonstrations of power for their own sake, and a God who works on Their own schedule.

In today's text, Jesus exhibits a keen understanding of Torah – one does not ever profane God by turning God's divinity into a party trick in the hopes of establishing one's credibility; nor does one demand that such divine power prove its worth; nor should one be lured by false powers – the finite, flimsy trappings of this world. The text tells us that Jesus is worthy. And righteous. And disciplined.

And just in case we didn't know it – Jesus is of God. This Son of Man leaves Satan bewildered and even the angels wait on Jesus.

We're just beginning to scratch at the surface of our story. We're running into a similar place as last week with the Transfiguration account. If we're honest with ourselves, we aren't usually the type of people who spend significant amounts of time dissecting sensational accounts. We don't

seek to actualize 40-day fasts in a lonely desert, and a literal devil, and a literal host of angels. That's more the work of old, the pre-Enlightenment era kind of faith. "It's a nice metaphor," we say.

But it's really not that nice, nor tame. For whether literal account, or fanciful fable, myth or fact, or somewhere in between, this text offers a biting truth: We, humanity, both individually and collectively, seek power. But not God's power. We seek worldly power.

We seek to make bread from stones, not by trusting that God's manna will be provided, but rather, by using our money, or our influence, or our stubborn determination to create worldly solutions. And somehow our hunger pangs are never stilled.

We seek to levitate, not in the hopes of experiencing the ever-surprising powers of the Holy Spirit, but rather in the hopes of finding the proof of our own making: tangible, indisputable, rational facts that tell us God is so.

We want to believe that God's love is enough. We want to believe in a kinship and connectivity where our share is so full, and that of our neighbors, too, that we'll never have to worry about feeling left out. Still, the powers and principalities dangle their privileges right in front of our noses. And as much as we want to say: "No thanks," we long to cozy up to them.

Jesus spends 40 days in the desert. Or if we cling to metaphor, Jesus spends a long time discerning his call. And Jesus comes to realize that God is not about power. God is about love. And God is about community.

Today's story reminds us that we still think God is about power rather than love. And the story reminds us that too often, we seek to

demonstrate our power as an act of love for God. And too often, Lent becomes our 40-day demonstration.

Well...here's what I believe.

Giving up chocolate, or red wine, or social media, or even Lent for Lent, may help us discern how and what it is to love God. But none of these actions will make us love God any more or any less than we already do. Because God is not a transaction or a test. God is a process. God is fluid, and mysterious, and bigger than any season.

In the person of Jesus, we meet someone who shows us our best glimpse, our best understanding of God. Jesus spends his entire life discerning God, contemplating God, seeking to make his own life demonstrative of the nature and character of God.

If we're not careful, we might use the Season of Lent as an excuse to seek God in the wilderness. Said another way, we might tend to believe that God is only visible in the wilderness, our wilderness. But remember, today's story occurs *AFTER* the wilderness experience. Jesus goes back into the world. And Jesus doesn't seek power, Jesus offers love. He offers love at the table.

The love and presence of Jesus felt evident to me standing in this very room on Wednesday night with ashes of mortality, and imperfection, and sourced goodness on my palm and my forehead, and spread, too on all those Millbrookers gathered round. Matter of fact, there's still some ash stubbornly hanging onto my fingernail. And Lloyd and Jessica told me the love and presence of Jesus were evident for them, too, huddled in the copy room, in workout leggings, supping on Ritz Crackers on cocktail napkins and grape juice in Dixie toothbrush cups.

This is today's good news. Jesus is still at our tables. And the love of Jesus is still palpable. And whether we are floundering in the desert, or lost in a proof text, or even experiencing our first caffeine headache brought on by Lenten adventures; Jesus is waiting for us there. Jesus is there to tell us that when we come to tables, we needn't seek power; we needn't demonstrate the miraculous; we needn't worry about our status; or hoard the crumbs of our manna. Because Christ's Table, God's table is enough. It's big enough for every person, and every experience. and every season.

We're making our way to Maundy Thursday, April 3, 42 days away. We'll gather together, and we'll rediscover the origins of the First Supper. In the meantime, wander, be wild, fast, think hard, take on something new, seek out your own Exodus. And know this, when the journey's through, a table awaits.

It's a table that's big enough to outshine the darkness of a cross. Today. And every day. And we are invited.

Thanks be to God!