

“If...”

Matthew 3:16-4:11

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • January 27, 2013

One Sunday the pastor had preached a fiery sermon about the devil. After the service a couple of young boys were talking about it. One of them said, “All this talk about the devil has me kind of scared.” The other one said, “Aw, don’t worry about it.” “Don’t you believe the devil exists?” asked the first one. “Naa. It’s like Santa Claus. It’s probably just your dad.”

In today’s story of Jesus in the wilderness there are only three characters – Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the devil, and so that brings us face to face with a topic that people either love or hate to discuss – Satan. On one hand, many people, even faithful believers, dismiss the whole idea of Satan. Their view is that the idea of the devil is merely a pre-modern way of explaining why bad things happen, but they don’t believe Satan exists in reality. On the other hand, some people love to find Satan lurking behind every minor inconvenience in their lives. If the alarm doesn’t go off or if they burn their toast, it’s the work of the devil. Neither view is in line with what the Bible teaches us concerning Satan.

We actually have very little information in the Bible concerning Satan, yet he is mentioned by name 49 times, and he’s called the devil another 33 times. In the Old Testament, Satan is portrayed as the accuser in the heavenly court. The prophet Zechariah said, “Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him.”

In the New Testament we find Jesus speaking frequently about Satan. The picture we get there is of the devil working against God’s purposes, trying to split people off from God. In fact, the Greek word used here for the devil is *diabolos*,

which is where we get our word diabolical, and the root literally means “to split.”

When you get right down to it, though, the reason the church teaches about the existence of Satan is because the biblical writers make it clear that the devil exists and that Jesus had to deal with the existence of Satan. The power of the devil is what Christ saves us from.

What’s most important for us today is that Jesus really did face temptations in the wilderness. When Jesus was baptized and came up from the water, the Holy Spirit visibly came upon Jesus and then God the Father spoke from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” What an amazing spiritual experience. Most of us never experience God’s presence in such a direct, obvious way. But we do have times or seasons or events when we experience God’s presence and guidance in an amazing way. Spiritual retreats like the Walk to Emmaus or Cursillo can provide those kinds of experiences where God seems to speak directly to you. Mission trips, especially to foreign countries, are another time that many people experience God’s presence in a new way.

But notice that right after his spiritual mountain-top experience, Jesus is “led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” The experience of God’s closeness is followed by a feeling of separation. One of the reasons I love this passage is because when I find myself in that spiritual wilderness when God seems so far away, I am reminded of his promise that I am his beloved and that he has not really left me.

Jesus is in the wilderness fasting for forty days and forty nights. In the Bible numbers are almost always important, but

some numbers are more important. The number 40 is one of those. Matthew wants us to think about the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years and Moses fasting for 40 days and 40 nights before receiving the law. Jesus is the new Moses. He is reliving Israel's history, getting right this time all the things they had screwed up.

After 40 days of fasting, we're told that Jesus was hungry and we think, "of course he was!" But that's the point. We are getting a glimpse into Jesus' humanity. He really was human and he really did get hunger and tired and happy and sad. And so he also really was tempted. If we say, "well, Jesus is God and so he couldn't really be tempted," we are denying his humanity, and deny the meaning of Hebrews 4:15 which says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." The point is that Jesus was fully human and could have chosen to give in to the temptations.

Oscar Wilde once wrote, "I can resist anything except temptation." For many of us that's probably true. But the good news for us is that Jesus was able to resist temptation. There is actually a double meaning here. In English, the word "tempt" is almost always used to mean tempting to do evil. But the word translated in this passage can also mean "to test" or "to prove." Jesus was led by the Spirit to be tested, in order to prove that he is indeed the Son of God. But he was also tempted by Satan to sin.

Let's look at these temptations and Jesus' response to them. God has just spoken from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son" and in the very next scene Satan, called the tempter, says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Satan immediately tries to cast doubt on what God has said. This is exactly what he did to

Eve in the Garden of Eden. He said, "Did God really say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'"

We face the same thing in our lives today. We come to worship and we hear that God loves us and forgives us. But then we leave and we begin to hear that nagging doubt. Can God really forgive me for *that*? Does God really love *me*? Can I really trust Jesus? We are tempted by the "Ifs." If I lost 20 pounds he would love me. If God loved me I wouldn't be struggling to make ends meet. If I really trusted Jesus I wouldn't think those thoughts.

Satan challenges Jesus to prove that he is the Son of God. He basically says, "look, if you really are the Son of God then prove it. Show off your power." He then brings three temptations. The first temptation is to turn stones into bread in order to satisfy his hunger. On the surface this seems reasonable to us. He's hungry, he has the ability to provide food supernaturally – remember the feeding of the 5000? – and no one is around to know. But it is not the will of the Father that Jesus turn stones into bread. More important than satisfying his physical hunger is for Jesus to trust his Father to provide. "To change rocks into food – to use his miraculous powers to satisfy his hunger – is to promote self-interest above God's cause." So he answers Satan by quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3, which is a reminder of the way that God provided manna to the Israelites while they were in the wilderness.

For the second temptation, Satan takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." Now Satan quotes Scripture from Psalm 91 saying, "He will command his angels concerning you, and on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." It's ironic that Satan quotes from Psalm 91 because this Psalm

was used in ancient Israel in almost a superstitious way to ward off evil.

Where the first temptation targeted Jesus' weakness, his hunger, this one targets his strength, his trust in God's divine protection. Satan conveniently leaves out, "to guard you in all your ways" when he quotes this Psalm. The point of the Psalm is that God watches over you and provides for you as you live out your life daily in normal fashion. Satan's temptation was for Jesus to require that God provide that protection in an extraordinary way. It was to test God's care. But Jesus is the one being tested here, not the Father. The other thing that is important to note here is that the devil's temptation was to provide a spectacle – a show – of God's power. But Jesus despises spectacles. That applies to us as well. In our society today we are often tempted to make a show out of our worship or out of our devotion. But the way of Christ is the way of quite humility and reverence.

Jesus once again responds with Scripture, this time from Deuteronomy 6:16, which refers to the time when Moses struck the rock in order to get water to satisfy the grumbling Israelites. What's important for us here is the way Jesus responds to Satan's use of Scripture by using another Scripture. Satan is subtly twisting the meaning of the Scripture by taking it out of context, using it for his own purpose rather than the purpose that God intended. Jesus is showing us that the proper way to understand any Scripture is in light of the whole counsel of Scripture.

For the final temptation Satan drops all pretense. He comes right out and says, "I'll give you the whole world if you will just worship me." Bringing the whole world to himself is Jesus' primary purpose. Here Satan is offering to hand it over in exchange for one act of worship. Jesus can accomplish his purpose and avoid all the pain and suffering by this one little act. How often

are *we* willing to sacrifice our principles and values in order to speed up God's plan. This temptation was for Jesus to avoid fulfilling God's plan, which involved going to the cross, dying and being raised again. To bow to Satan would be to gain power without suffering.

So what about us today? How does this apply to our lives right now? There are several key points, I think. First, notice the *place*. Jesus is tempted while alone in the wilderness. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for the purpose of being tested. But we often go there on our own. One of the best ways to avoid temptation is to surround yourself with faithful Christians. There's strength in numbers because the enemy tends to prey on us when we are alone and most vulnerable. This, by the way, is one of the key principles of AA. Get out of the situation where the temptations take place and get help from others who understand the temptations.

Second is the *power*. Jesus responded to each of the temptations by quoting from Scripture. The Apostle Paul tells us in First Corinthians to flee from sin. And James says, "resist the devil." How do we go about that? By knowing the Scriptures so well that we can call upon them when we are facing temptations. Finally notice the *product*. As we learn the Scriptures and avoid the temptations, we learn to truly trust the Word of God in our lives. Most importantly, when we begin to hear those "ifs," we can have the confidence to say, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'" No ifs, ands or buts.

*Amen*