

A Crown Without A Cross? Matthew 4:1-11

In our Gospel reading this morning it's Jesus' first day on the job. Immediately he's confronted with three major temptations. He's also confronted with this basic question: Would he take the crown without the cross?

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. It's a time of reflection on the passion and death of Jesus. It's a period of repentance for the church as a whole, and for each one of us personally. Our Lenten journey begins with the story of the temptation of Christ.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the Wilderness, to be in communion with God and to reflect upon his upcoming ministry. While there, Satan confronts Jesus. It is reminder to us that goodness is not synonymous with innocence. True goodness comes only after a struggle with evil.

Let's look at the three temptations: The first temptation is turning a **Stone into Bread - The temptation to use power for the wrong purposes.** Satan addresses Jesus by saying, "If you are the Son of God." It may look as if Satan is questioning Jesus' credentials, but he's not. He never questions the credentials of Jesus. He knows who Jesus is.

What Satan is doing is trying to do here is to get Jesus to question himself, to have Jesus put doubt in place of destiny. If he can get Jesus for just a moment to question himself, to misuse his power, to take the crown without the cross, to turn stone into bread, Satan will have won.

You see, this not just about Jesus being hungry after fasting for 40 days. This is Satan tempting Jesus to meet the need of world hunger. Use your power, Satan says, to address the issue of human hunger. Jesus would have sought to buy our affection and devotion.

But that's a false picture of mankind. We do not live for things but for intimacy. We do not live for the marketplace but for the family. Jesus put it this way, "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." Satan has misunderstood mankind and therefore misunderstood Jesus' need.

To be sure, Satan sees that Jesus is hungry. What he doesn't understand is that there's another type of hunger. It's the hunger for righteousness. Jesus is feeding on the Word of God. Satan is challenging Jesus to feed a hungry world. What Jesus is saying is that you cannot know what is good unless you first read the scriptures. We are created to please God, to be in right relationship with God, and we must therefore go to God's Word.

It's easy to lose track of who we are and why we're here. It's been such a very long time since humanity was in the Garden. Sin has wrecked humanity. It's hard to imagine what man was like in the Garden by viewing him today.

We've lost our understanding of what mankind once was: obedient, righteous, the image of God, a reflection of the divine. This is what Jesus reminds Satan. Bread is not how mankind lives. Man lives in obedience to the Word of God. If we come to God we come because we belong with him not because he has something for us. We come because our soul needs to be in his presence, not because our belly needs to be filled.

Satan asks, wouldn't you rather have your desires met first, your cravings satisfied in full? Wouldn't you rather take the crown without the cross?

The second temptation we shall call: **Fall on the Rocks: The Temptation to gain popularity by performance.** And if the first temptation deals with the physical needs of Jesus, then the second deals with his reputation.

The devil sits Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple. “Jump off,” he said, “for it is written, He shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all ways.” This is a quote from Psalm 91. Do you see what has happened? In the first temptation Jesus has answered Satan by saying, “It is written.” And because Satan is an active listener and a fast learner, he begins his second temptation with, “It is written.” He’s showing Jesus that he is capable of quoting scripture, too.

Jesus refuses to jump, however, quoting from yet another verse, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.” This is from Deut 6.16. This doesn’t mean that Deuteronomy is more important than the Psalms, but that simply quoting scripture is not enough. It’s how we interpret scripture that matters. Try as we might, we cannot manipulate scripture for your own purpose. Said another way, we cannot accomplish the will of God by our own efforts.

Abraham tried to do this when he lay with his maidservant Hagar and who birthed Ishmael. God’s response was to remind Abraham that He had promised him a son through Sarah. And in time God’s promise was fulfilled and Isaac was born. But there was a problem.

The promise of God had to be taken from the first born, Ishmael, and given to the second, Isaac. Which created jealousy. And in the end Hagar and Ishmael’s lives are ruined when they are banished from the tribe, all this because Abraham tried to force God’s promise.

We would be wise not test a promise of God. Not to try to accomplish what God has promised by our own means. Even if those means are backed up with Scripture. Jesus will not and cannot do a right thing for a wrong reason.

Satan asks, wouldn’t you rather avoid the long way to accomplishing your goal? Wouldn’t you rather avoid the path that requires patience? Wouldn’t you rather circumvent suffering? Wouldn’t you rather have the crown without the cross?

The third temptation is **serving the wrong master: The temptation to idolatry.** In the third temptation, Satan finally comes out in the open. He no longer flatters Jesus by calling him Son of God. He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and tells him that all of this will be his, if, for a just moment, he bows down and worships him. He’s saying, “You want people to follow you, do you not? Then simply blink your eyes at evil and they will come in droves.”

But Jesus refuses to change the world by becoming a part of the world. He quotes from Moses in the Old Testament: “You shall worship the Lord your God and He alone shall you serve.” If the world comes to Jesus it must rise up to Him, for He will not stoop down to it. He will not be enticed by the glitter of the world.

So with the trial over, Satan has failed in his attempt to bribe Jesus with fame, fortune, and power. And Jesus says, “Satan, be gone.” The implication is that Jesus has merely been tolerating the presence of Satan. But the devil does not go away empty handed. He still has all of his kingdoms and he now knows something about the nature of God. He understands God’s restraint.

We should realize, also, that this temptation in the wilderness is not the only time Jesus encountered evil. Clearly he faced it over and over. When Jesus turned His face to Jerusalem, He and the disciples knew the evil that awaited. It was Simon Peter who tried to talk him out of it by saying, in essence, “You don’t have to do this.”

And then there's the scene with Jesus on the cross and the centurion taunts him, saying, "If you are the Son of God, then jump down from the cross and save yourself." That sounds hauntingly familiar to the challenge in our lesson today for Jesus to jump off the pinnacle. Truth is Jesus struggled with evil and temptation over and over.

The crucial question for us to consider this morning is what this all means for us? The ultimate temptation of Jesus was that He could have a crown without a cross. That's the temptation His followers face today. We want power without pain. We want risk without danger. We want victory without struggle or commitment. It can't be. It won't be.

You will be tempted. And in those times when you're in the wilderness, trying to find your way through, when temptation comes and offers you the wrong answer, the wrong choice, the wrong use of power, the wrong way to gain popularity, the wrong kind of partnership -- remember that Christ was tempted as well.

Remember that he did not turn stones into bread but fed himself on the word of God. Remember that he didn't fling himself upon the rocks to seek man's approval but only sought God's. Remember that he didn't render service to Satan but obeyed his father in Heaven.

And remember this twist ending of Lent. If Jesus had saved himself, he couldn't save us. Jesus was tempted to take the crown without the cross, one without the other. But he choose both. Will we?