

Matt. 4:1-11 The temptation of Jesus

Every day as a teacher, I am supposed to share with my class the objective for the day and “success criteria” so that they know from the beginning of class what it will take on this day to be successful. I know that the word success conjures up all kinds of meanings and images from our consumeristic, materialistic society but for a moment let's set that aside. Let's think of success today in terms of meeting expectations or perhaps faithfulness. In my classroom, Usually the criteria are very specific like “I will complete the worksheet on classroom objects.” Or, “I will participate in this vocabulary game.” Or “I will ask my neighbor this question in German.” The objective and criteria must be clear and measureable and it's best if I can come up with a way for the students to show me that they have met the objective and that they were successful according to the criteria which I set.

There are several reasons why the school asks teachers to do this. One of those reasons is so that I communicate clearly what's expected in concrete ways so that students know if they're meeting those expectations. The other main reason is so that I don't just stand there and blah blah blah in German the whole time and say that Oh yes the student should know how to do this and that when I have not provided them opportunities to show me that they can do this and that. It provides accountability both for me and for the students so that we are on the same page in our objectives, and expectations and the methods I use to reach those objectives.

This story of the testing of Jesus in the wilderness reminds me of objectives and success criteria for Jesus to show who he is and the methods he will use in carrying out his calling. Jesus has just been baptized and has been told that he is the beloved son of God and everyone around him who heard that voice is a witness to that. But now he has to go away from the people to whom he will be ministering as the beloved son of God,

as the Messiah,

the One they've been waiting so long for.

Wouldn't this be a better time for the triumphal entry? But no, he will go through testing, will sacrifice through fasting, through loneliness and isolation and literally no pillow under his head out in the elements. The wilderness is not the spa. He faces the temptation to exchange God's vision of who he is, God's objective and God's success criteria,

for Satan's objectives.

Will Jesus use the devil's methods to show the world who he is and what his mission is and how he will achieve it?

Jesus' temptation, although just 40 days, recalls the children of Israel and their wilderness experience of testing for 40 years. And of Moses fasting on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights before being given the tablets of the covenant with God.

As those before him, Jesus will be tested to see if he will do God's will God's way.

Will he remain loyal to the God of Israel or will he choose the way of the devil that manipulates, seeks attention, seeks power, all for selfish gain?

The first temptation is about identity "if you are the son of God," and on whom you depend for sustenance in your time of great need.

Jesus has been in the wilderness for 40 days, has already fasted and prayed, that's a long time to be alone, to not eat and have none of the comforts of home. So by now he is probably very weak and the text tells us that he is not just hungry but famished.

And it's in this moment of being famished and weak from all the sacrifices that the true temptations start. It's not when he first gets there. We don't know what was happening those first 40 days, whether literal or metaphoric.

Jesus answers that we live by every word proceeding from the mouth of God. I find it fascinating that the devil is quoting scripture, and that Jesus responds with scripture and particularly scripture from the book of Deuteronomy which all dealt with Israel's wilderness experience. This shows us again that this is about loyalty to the same God as the children of Israel, who is also our God. And this God is one

who shows care for God's people and that just like the children of Israel, Moses and now Jesus we will do well to depend on God for sustenance and nurture in our time of need.

What word or words is God speaking to you and to Fellowship of Hope that will give life that nourishes our spirits, just like our bodies are nourished by bread?

The second temptation is something of an ego-trip. OK, if you're all that, prove that you're invincible. Nothing bad can happen to you. God won't let you suffer. I wonder if the devil was actually trying to destroy Jesus by giving him a false sense of his safety if he were to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple?

Or is it more about the ego-trip of fame by means of miracles and magic? And even as the devil quotes scripture saying that God will protect him Jesus doesn't take the bait and says your question isn't valid. I have no need to prove myself to you and especially not like this. And I can only imagine three years later, when Jesus was in the garden begging God to let this cup, the impending crucifixion, pass from him, he remembered the wilderness time and was strengthened to again say,

not my will, but yours be done.

The third temptation is about power and authority, but the deal there is that you basically have to sell your soul to the devil to get that. It stands out to me that in several places in the New Testament it talks about the devil as being the present world ruler, however Jesus refuses to succumb to this deal. Instead we know through the full reading of the book of Matthew that at the very end Jesus says that he has been given all authority in heaven and on earth, but this isn't because he sold his soul to the devil but he emptied himself and became obedient even to the death on the cross and **then** God highly exalted him And gave him a name above all names so that at the name of Jesus every knee in heaven on earth and under the earth might bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the father.

It is only after the severe time of sacrifice and testing that the angels come and wait on him. I wonder what it's like to have angels waiting on you. Maybe some of

you have stories about that. I imagine it has something to do with serving, comforting, providing for your needs perhaps even helping you find your way home because you might be confused by this time about where you are and too weak to get yourself home.

All three synoptic gospels have this story. And as we heard last week from Mary when that is the case we know that Matthew and Luke were probably looking at Mark but it's interesting to me that the Mark version is very condensed and does not mention anything about the dialogue back and forth with the devil nor the angels. And in Luke we have the story but there is an emphasis on the spirit's presence and empowerment, but nothing about the angels caring for Jesus at the end. Surely these stories were circulating among the community of faith and thank God we have these multiple sources and witnesses to Jesus life.

Jesus was tested in relation to his call as the Messiah. What are the success criteria against which he will be measured to fulfill his objective, his calling? What does it look like for Jesus to be faithful as the Messiah? How will people know that he is the Messiah?

In the Believers Church Bible commentary, Gardener poses the question to us, "what does it look like for us as followers of Jesus to be faithful as the messianic community which acts in Jesus name? And to pick up our Lenten theme, we know we are created in God's image, but are we being shaped by Jesus? Or shaped by other influences?

What is our objective in this season?

How will we know if we have met it?

As we answer these questions as a community how are we opening ourselves to hear every word that proceeds from the mouth of our Lord?

What is our collective practice in hearing those words?

What temptations are we facing in this wilderness time of transition? I Haven't been among you long enough to speak with any certainty so please take these offerings in a more general way, how people in general deal with transitions.

I offer these possible temptations and look forward to hearing your feedback on these and if there are others you can think of.

- Temptation to stick with tradition—this place, this group, this way of doing things. Asking God to show us what new thing God is doing can be really scary. It isn't so much that people are afraid of change, but that they fear loss. Loss of something good. Something familiar and comfortable.
- Temptation of shame—what will people say if we radically change things? Will we feel ashamed, embarrassed or like we failed?
- Temptation to get stuck in negativity—disappointment or hurt can lead to disillusionment and then on to cynicism, from which no good thing can come.
- Temptation to disengage—whether it's the paralysis of analysis, denial, or a sense that we just can't deal with it.

Whether these or other temptations, what can we learn from how Jesus handled temptations in this story?

- Jesus relied on the Spirit. We get this more from the Luke story than the other two gospels. He had just been baptized where he heard the voice say, "You are my beloved." We will do well to remember our belovedness and to rely on the Spirit.
- Jesus knew that he didn't have to prove himself or measure himself against anyone else's standard.
- Jesus knew what his mission was, and the means by which he would accomplish it. And the means he would reject. He was really clear about the kind of power he would use—not to shock and awe, not to gain a showy following, or for personal gain, but to teach, preach and heal and walk in obedience to the character and nature of God.

To summarize, Jesus wasn't buying what Satan had to sell. Let us be shaped by this Jesus, engage the agenda of transition, not temptation and not waste the opportunity to ask what new thing God is wanting to do among us.

Sharon Norton