

“Choices in the Desert”  
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Matthew 4:1-11

Not too long ago, I spoke about the importance and meaning of baptism. Although Jesus’ baptism was a *very* important part of his preparation for ministry — and all that would come with it, his baptism was both a personal and a very *public* experience. And of course, he was constantly surrounded by all kinds of people throughout his ministry.

But Jesus was equally as interested, I think, in the *interior* dimensions of his spiritual life — and ours. He often went apart from others to think and pray. He was committed to that which connects us with the Divine deep within.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has a powerful, very personal experience in the desert. Even though Bryce shared the more formal, biblical version of events, I’ve asked Sara and David to help me share it with you in a more fun and accessible way...

(Scene: Jesus is slumped over in a chair, with her head in her hands.)

Narrator: *Jesus has just spent 40 days fasting alone in the desert. Fasting is a way to sharpen our inner senses, focus our thoughts, and connect us with the Divine. Extreme hunger can bring on hallucinations, and Jesus receives a visitor...*

Jesus: *(groans)*

Satan: *Hey there, Jesus! How’s it going? Is that your stomach growling? Feeling a little peckish?*

Jesus: *Hey, Satan. Yeah, I'm hungry. Somehow, I think you're going to try and take advantage of that.*

Satan: *So Jesus, if you're the Son of God, why not turn one of these stones into a nice loaf of ciabatta? Or a cheeseburger? Or some bacon? Or a lobster? Or...*

Jesus: (interrupting) *Satan! First of all, I'm Jewish! You know I don't eat any of that stuff. More importantly, I need more than just food to live. I need a spiritual life. I need God.*

Narrator: *Satan then takes Jesus to the highest point on the roof of the Temple in Jerusalem.*

Satan: *So, if you are really the Son of God, why not prove it by throwing yourself off the roof? Angels will surely come and catch you.*

Jesus: *You know I don't like heights, Satan. And anyway, I'm not really into testing God. Sure, some things need proof. With God, I'd rather go by faith. Now, will you please get us out of here?!*

Narrator: *Then Satan takes Jesus to the top of a high mountain...*

Jesus: *Satan! This isn't any better!*

Satan: *You'll be fine. So, Jesus. I have a proposition for you. If you worship me, all this will be yours!*

Jesus: (in an English accent) *What, the curtains?*

Satan: *No, not the curtains! All that you can see! All the great lands and cities in the world. You'd be king! Everyone would have to obey you.*

Jesus: (sighing) *Get out of here, Satan. I only worship God. And I'm getting tired of your shenanigans!*

(Satan shrugs and walks away.)

Thank you for indulging us. And I'm glad that some of you got the Monty Python reference!

*What was going on in the desert?* Why did Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include this story in their versions of Jesus' ministry? What significance does it have for *us*?

I think it's important to talk at least a little bit about Jesus' humanness and his divinity, whatever that means to you. When I was in seminary, my New Testament professor asked us to debate the question, *Was Jesus not able to sin... or able not to sin?*

Even if that seems a little esoteric — like something seminarians and ministers would just *love* to debate, it's actually a *really* important question! Is Jesus a puppet of God or is he a very special human being with autonomy? When I was 22 and in class, I chose *able not to sin*.

I have since revised my answer to, *He was able not to sin, but I believe he did sin — at least every once in a while. Otherwise he wouldn't be truly human and I wouldn't be able to relate to him.* After all, isn't the point of Jesus' humanity that he has a truly *human* connection with us?

The temptation in the desert is definitely a combination of human and divine experience. If he were *only* divine, he wouldn't have been affected in the least by Satan's testing. He would not have had this dream-vision to begin with.

If he were *only* human, he would definitely not have been able to withstand the temptation to eat after going without for so long.

About those 40 days. Some have said to me over the years that the human body simply cannot last 40 days in the desert without food. And that is true. But... Let's look at the symbolism here. Remember Noah going *40 days and 40 nights* in the ark with his crew and passengers? Moses wandering *40 years* in the desert with his people? In the Bible, the number 40 is used to symbolize *a lot of time* to endure some kind of test.

I'm not sure *how* God tests us — or *if* God tests us at all. But I do know that the human experience is *full* of tests!

Learning to walk and talk as a child. Facing the fact that we're not the center of the universe. Figuring out how to act when we're with others. Navigating adolescence. Feeling lonely... or being rejected definitely feel like tests. Mental illness and addiction. Academic challenges. Physical hurdles, whether on the sports field or in a rowing shell or climbing a mountain or running a marathon. Tests of endurance. Tests of courage when we are seriously ill. Professional challenges. Bodily temptations: to indulge ourselves in eating or using substances or sex or laziness. The temptation to accumulate money... or things... or friends... or influence. Just getting older can feel like a test.

How have *you* been tested or tempted? If you are being tested now, how are you doing? What are you learning? Are you going it alone or asking for help? Are you turning to God, to friends, your partner, a group, this church, a therapist?

If your biggest tests are in your past, how did you fare? Did you come out stronger or just beaten up? What did you learn and how did you grow?

Let's remember that *there are no Jesuses in this room*, so we're not going to do as well as he did. Although, with his help and with each other's, we will make it through.

Jesus resists the temptation to turn stones into bread because he deeply desires God, so much so that he is able to say no to that which he wants the most right then. He knows he will be OK.

He passes the test on the Temple roof. Maybe because frankly it isn't much of a temptation. *Go ahead and jump. No, thank you!* Seriously, I don't think he is so much resisting temptation here as rejecting the need to be reassured that he would always be safe. He *knows* that he won't always be safe, especially given his mission in life.

He passes the test on the mountaintop because *he has no interest* in being a king or someone that others would be forced to obey. He wants to connect people with God; he wants to serve, not to be served.

So, for Jesus, in this story, passing these tests and resisting these temptations is not so much about *being good*, it's about rejecting the fear of not having enough... rejecting the need to be constantly reassured... and rejecting, most of all, self-indulgent power over others. *For him, it's about choosing God and all that comes with that relationship.*

And what does it mean to choose God? It means to choose a life in which we shift away from fear and toward trusting that, with God, we're going to be OK... Shifting away from neediness and towards inner security and generosity of spirit... away from the need to control *everything* and allow the Divine Spirit — which is always within us — to lead us.

And that will take humility. And that will take courage. And that will take faith.

God bless you on your journey.