

1 LENT 2011

Matt. 4:1-11 "Up A Mountain and Down A Valley"

In the opening line of the text we find the three characters in this drama. Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the devil. Each character has a part to play in the temptation drama. The drama begins with, "the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted." Note that the Spirit does not lead Jesus into temptation, but into the wilderness where he encounters the evil one. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Luther said in his explanation of the Lord's Prayer,

"God tempts no one to sin, but we pray in this petition that God would watch over us and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful self may not deceive us and draw us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins. And we pray that even though we are so tempted, we may still win the final victory."

The Holy Spirit does not tempt Jesus nor does the Holy Spirit tempt you but the Holy Spirit can lead you into confrontation with situations that will test you. Testing can improve and strengthen your faith just as exercising strengthens your body. Before you can run a marathon you must first train by walking, then running short distances and eventually you will be strong enough to run the marathon. So with testing of faith. The Holy Spirit trains you by leading you into confrontation with things that will test and strengthen your faith. St. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

The second character in this drama is the devil. In our time we don't hear much about the devil. Many people have stopped believing there is a devil, relegating him to the realm of superstition. But in the Bible, the devil is vividly described as that force which is opposed to God and the people of God. I Peter 5:8 says, "The devil prowls the earth like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour". St. Paul says in Eph. 6:12, the devil is one of the "principalities and powers of the present evil age and a spiritual force of evil in the heavenly realms." In the movies demons are destructive. Only a madman would be in

league with demons. But the devil is subtle and tricky. He comes to us with smooth words and innocent sounding temptations. In scripture, the purpose of the devil is clear, namely to “drive a wedge between us and God”. The N.T. term for the devil is “diabolos” which literally means “the one who splits or divides.”

In our time we have attempted to explain evil in various ways. For some, evil is just a riddle of existence. For others, systemic evil is found in institutions and structures which oppress people economically or politically. Folks who dismiss the power of Satan generally think like a college professor who might say something like this... “Sin, is not primarily individual or perhaps even moral. Sin is primarily social, economical, and political; and the roots of sin are not present so much in the hearts and consciences of individual persons, or, they are present there only insofar as they exist primarily in malevolently structured interrelationships of oppression and injustice.”

(Dr. F.D. Brunner in his Matthew Commentary). It reminds me of the limerick,

There once was a man from Esser,
whose knowledge grew lesser and lesser.
It grew so small
That he knew nothing at all,
And now he is a college professor.

Satan is real enough. Just ask a person who has been used or abused or ask a person who has experienced horrific violence or senseless loss.

Theologian, Frederic Dale Brunner, in his Matthew Commentary writes, “It seems historically true that when belief in the existence of the devil is banished from the front door, some evil power or theology of evil, by whatever name, reappears with a vengeance at the back door.” He goes on to say as an illustration of this, “A progressive nationalistic theology in Germany dismissed the demonic as myth and then experienced the hyper-demonic forces of Nazism...”

According to the clear witness of the N.T., the devil exists.” (Brunner p. 102) Martin Luther’s great hymn, A Mighty Fortress puts it this way,
“The old satanic foe, has sworn to work us woe,
With craft and dreadful might he arms himself to fight,
On earth he has no equal.”

The third person in this drama is Jesus. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. After this he was hungry. This shows us how Jesus, true man, was every bit like us. His hunger was real. He was weak. That is when the devil appeared to tempt him. Temptation always hits you in a weak moment. Evil attacks when you feel alone, lonely, unappreciated, hungry, tired, worn down by the struggles of life. That's why Chrysostom, an early Church theologian said, "Christians should stick together, for the devil is not as apt to attack when we are with other Xians in Xian fellowship."

The tempter tried to tempt, seduce and drive a wedge between Jesus and God. It began with a question intended to create doubt. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Where else in scripture have you heard this kind of temptation? In the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden of course. The serpent said to the woman, "Did God say you shall not eat of the fruit of this tree???" The temptation was to get Jesus to doubt God's word and his unique relationship to God. In his baptism in the river Jordan, Jesus heard the voice of God saying, "You are my son, my beloved." Now the devil tries to get Jesus to prove that he really is the Son of God. "Just a simple test will do, if you have the power... make these stones into bread." Jesus was tempted to go beyond the simple word of God and perform a miracle to prove his unique relationship to God. You also are tempted to go beyond the word and promises of God. The devil tempts you by saying, "How can you be the child of God when you still have so many problems and doubts? Get rid of your problems (turn your stones into bread) and then people will see that you are a Christian." It is the devil's temptation to make Xians believe that they must have miraculous success, radiant power in order to be Christians.

Jesus dealt with temptation by quoting scripture. "It is written, man does not live by bread alone."

If the devil could not get to Jesus through his weakness and hunger, then how about getting to him through his strong faith? This is like spiritual judo – where you use the opponents strength against him. The devil took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and tempted him to doubt the word of God, "If you really are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; because it is written, "God will give his angels charge of you and on their hands they will bear you up, lest

you dash your foot against a stone.” Now, to throw yourself off a cliff to see if the angels will swoop down and rescue you is really to make God into your personal genie or bodyguard. Jesus said to the devil, “It is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

The devil then took Jesus up a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, “I will give all of these to you if you will just fall down and worship me.” Professor Brunner comments, “It is interesting to notice that the devil leads Jesus higher and higher; first from the wilderness and its rocks to the top of the temple and now, to a very high mountain. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, led Jesus down – down into the simple baptism of John, and then down still farther into the wilderness of temptation. The evil spirit leads Jesus farther and farther up, to a parapet of the temple or a high mountain top. The Holy Spirit’s way is not so much up into the fascinatingly holy, as it is down into the ordinarily lowly and into the way of the cross and suffering.” (p. 111).

Jesus replied with authority, “Get behind me Satan, for it is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” In all three temptations Jesus found his strength to resist sin by focusing on the word of God. “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” And “You shall not test the Lord your God.” And “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”

Professor Brunner writes, “Jesus’ faith in God led him into modesty where rocks stayed rocks, where Jesus walked back down the stairs of the temple and nothing striking happened, and where the winning of the kingdoms of the world was left to a long death march – a steady, historic walk to a cross.” (Brunner p. 114)

Jesus was faithful in the face of the tempter’s power. He used the word of God to defend himself and he trusted in God alone, even as he went down from the mountain top into the valley of the shadow of death where a cross waited for him and where he died for you. Thanks be to God. AMEN