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Matthew 4:1-11
“A Healing Journey: After the Temptation”

The first book of the Old Testament begins with the story of Adam and Eve. Yet before long, that first couple ate the forbidden fruit. They were tempted by power, having been told that if they ate the fruit, they would be like God, knowing good and evil. They succumbed to temptation, which led them to know shame and fear and to hide from the Lord among the shadows of the Garden of Eden.

The second book of the Old Testament tells another human story about the Hebrews, the children of Abraham, who were slaves in Egypt until God sent Moses to lead them to safety. The Lord delivered them, but the people were tempted to doubt God. They grumbled against God when they became hungry, so the Lord sent them manna to eat. They murmured against God when they were thirsty, putting the Lord to the test until water came forth for them from the rocks of the wilderness. And they doubted God by making for themselves an idol of a golden calf, even though the first commandment said plainly, “You shall have no other gods before me.” They succumbed to temptation, which became part of Israel’s story from that day forth.

When we come to the first book of the New Testament, there’s a story about the birth of a child, Jesus, called Immanuel, which means “God is with us.” This child grows into a man, who at his baptism saw the heavens open and heard a voice say, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Immediately Jesus was sent off to consider what his calling meant, and during that time in the wilderness, he was tempted three times. We will look at this event in more detail, but I want you to keep in mind that there are two parts to this story: the temptations themselves, and what happened after the temptations.

First, the three temptations: Each of the temptations offers Jesus something specific and something universal. For the first temptation, Jesus is hungry, so the devil suggests he turn stones into bread. That’s the specific temptation. But on a deeper level, what is being suggested is that Jesus should never have to deal with discomfort or stomach pains. He deserves a life of ease. He deserves a nice house, a nice car, a memory-foam mattress, and fresh-baked bread on demand. But Jesus replied, “No, a life of ease is not what life is about. It’s about God.”

For the second temptation, the devil took Jesus to the top of the temple and suggested he jump off. The specific temptation involved testing God’s promise to care for him. But the larger temptation was to believe that Jesus was promised a life of absolute security: Nothing could harm him: no random acts of violence, no rogue tornadoes or traffic accidents or malignant cancer cells – for haven’t the angels themselves been assigned to make sure Jesus doesn’t even stub a toe? Jesus rejected this temptation as well, saying, “No, don’t test God with our rules and demands. God alone is God.”



For the third temptation, the devil took Jesus up even higher, to a mountaintop from which he could see all the kingdoms of the world. Here the specific and the general temptation came together. Basically the devil said, “Bow down to me, for I am ‘Mr. Not God,’ and all the power in the world will belong to you.” This time Jesus casts away the devil, paraphrasing what he’d said after the last temptation: “Don’t question that God is God, for God alone is to be worshiped and praised.”

Now, let’s move from discussing Jesus’ temptations to talking about our own temptations, for that a subject we all know about. As it has been humorously said, “Lead us not into temptation. Just tell us where it is; we’ll find it on our own.” Yes, we’re familiar with the first two temptations. We’ve each been tempted to take moral shortcuts in order to lead lives of ease and of security. We’ve turned stones into bread, precious resources into cheap commodities, butter into guns, junk bonds into McMansions, and legal strategies into modern Jim Crow laws; we’ve told a little lie or turned a blind eye toward the truth, so that we can eat fresh bread in the wilderness and safely hang-glide off temple walls.

And if we’re honest, we are acquainted with the third temptation as well, on both a personal level and a national level. How often has the forbidden fruit been plucked anew from our modern Gardens of Eden, because we long to be gods, powerful, and at the center of all things? What person ever wrote a tax code that put the burden of sacrifice more on themselves than upon those outside the halls of power? What empire, including the American empire, has not announced that their acts of domination are of course just and righteous, and assuredly the embodiment of God’s will?

The late 19th century preacher Henry Ward Beecher said it well: “All [of us] are tempted. There is no [one alive] that can’t be broken down, provided it is the right temptation, put in the right spot.” If that is true, what happens *after* we stumble? What happens after we fall to temptation, because we all do: Adam and Eve did. Moses did. King David did. Simon Peter did. It’s part of the creation story, the Exodus story, the bible story, and our story. What is it like to carry on as we pick ourselves up after the Fall?

The poet Mary Oliver wrote a lovely short poem called *Gethsemane* about the disciples’ succumbing to temptation that night of Jesus’ arrest. Listen.

Jesus said, wait with me. But the disciples slept.

The grass never sleeps. Or the roses. Nor does the lily have a secret eye that shuts until morning.

Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did, maybe the wind didn’t move; maybe the lake far away, where once he walked as on a blue pavement, lay still and waited, wild awake.

[But] oh the dear bodies, slumped and eye-shut, that could not keep that vigil, how they must have wept, so utterly human, knowing this too must be a part of the story.¹



This giving in to temptation; the little lie, the indiscretion, the silence when we should have spoken, the subtle allegiance to false gods. How we weep knowing this, too, must be part of our story. Is there a word of hope for us? Is there a healing journey we can follow *after* the temptation? Yes. Don't forget the little verse at the end of the temptation story in Matthew's gospel: vs. 11: *Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.* After temptation, God is still God. God's love is still for us. God's angels come to console us. That promise is not just for the Son of God, but for us, sons and daughters of God. That's why the temptation story is found in chapter 4, near the beginning of Matthew's gospel. Because for us, who do not have a perfect record of withstanding the devil's temptations, we only have to read a bit farther and notice what comes next: how Jesus left the wilderness and called his first disciples, Simon Peter, James, and John (Wait, aren't those the guys who fell asleep in Gethsemane?), just as Jesus calls us. Then Jesus went up on a mountaintop and spoke his Beatitudes, none of which congratulate people for perfect records in withstanding temptation, but instead offer words of healing for imperfect disciples: *Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn; blessed are those who are meek, who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.*

The heart of the gospel is not about withstanding temptation. The heart of the gospel is about what happens after the temptations: after the forbidden fruit is eaten, after we give vent to our worst natures while on our Exodus wanderings, after we rub our tired eyes and realize that we fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane despite being asked to stay awake during a dear friend's time of need. After the temptation story comes the whole gospel story. We read Matthew 4 so we can learn who *Jesus* is and why we trust him with our life and our soul. But we read Matthew 5 - 28 so we can learn who *we* are, as we follow this Jesus whose grace is sufficient and who offers us healing and hope and eternal life. He doesn't offer us ease and security and power. Those are false gods and false remedies. Jesus' path will take him to a cross and to a fourth temptation, when the devil came back one last time and spoke through the crowd the tempting words, *"If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross"* (Mt 27:40). Jesus refused the Tempter and died on the cross, but got the final word on Easter morning, saying "I am alive and with you always, to the end of the age."

The healing journey after times of temptation leads us along a path in which we are accompanied by the crucified-yet-risen Savior, who is our life, our peace, our salvation. Today part of that journey includes a meal as well. This is not bread from stones, but bread that transforms hearts of stone. This is not something seen from the highest temple, but held and shared at eye level. And this has nothing to do with worshiping worldly powers and empire aspirations. It is about God, who alone is God, and God's love for us before, during, and after we are tempted. That's the good news that keeps us going, no matter what.

¹ "Gethsemane," Mary Oliver, *Thirst*, 2006, p. 45.

