

**Sermon: TEMPTATION**  
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**Saint Matthew's UMC**  
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Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

— Matthew 4.1-11

Jesus did not go out into the desert to be tricked by some guy with horns. He went out there to face his own real temptations, The temptations that Jesus had to wrestle with are things that we all have to wrestle with. As peculiar as it might sound for us to think that it would be tempting to try to turn rocks into food or to jump off a high building or to worship the devil, the root urges beneath all those things are urges that we all have to wrestle with because they're basic needs of our ego minds as human beings.

We need to know that we're capable and durable and lovable. It's a basic human need to know that we're capable, that we have powers, that we can do some stuff, that we can have an influence in our environment, that we're not totally helpless and powerless. That's a good thing. That's how we get things done. But it becomes a temptation when we want that power to do things *separate from God*. When our own fears and desires take the place of God then all those powers that we have serve only our own fears and desires. That's what's harmful.

In sin I start wanting to use all of my powers to meet my own fears and desires. I cut myself off from God, because God is really the source of our power. God *is* our only power. If I start

thinking that I can make the world the way I want it, that I can just feed myself, that I can just turn these stones into bread, then I cut myself off from God, for the miracle is that it is actually God who makes bread, not me. It's God who makes wheat grow, not me. The temptation is to get caught up in this illusion of my own power.

When I do that I start being completely contained by my illusion and I start thinking of everything in the world according to my fears and desires. I look at rocks not in terms of what they are but in terms of whether they can feed me. If not, can I turn them into something that feeds me?

Think how that relates to how we treat people. We think, "Do I like you? Can I turn you into somebody that I like?" So we get cut off not only from God but from other people. We're unable to see them as they are and accept them as they are. We get cut off from reality and the ability to accept reality for what it is instead of always trying to turn it into something that isn't, always having control over everything.

If Jesus had fallen prey to the temptation to exercise his power for his own desires and fears he never would have been able to turn water into wine for others, or to feed the five thousand.

It's a perfectly natural human instinct to want to know that we ought to survive and that we are going to. It's a good thing that we have an ego that can say "this is who I am" and that protects that and that wants to find a secure place of belonging in this world. I need to know who am and that I am worth keeping alive. That's not bad; it's what keeps us from jumping in front of trains. But that becomes a temptation when we feel that separately from God.

If I want to discover who I really am and think of who I am as a self-enclosed individual not connected with God, it becomes destructive of life. Because then I'm going to start asking the *world* who I am, and the world will lie. The world will tell you what you're worth according to how good you make the world feel. People will value you according to how much you meet their fears and desires. Driven by this fear we fall into an ever spiraling need to survive. Now, it's not so tempting to want to throw ourselves off tall buildings, but it is tempting to want to be able to go through life without getting hurt.

And so we'll do all that we can to avoid suffering. So we make people happy so that they think that we're worth something. Then we get tangled up in this spiral of desperately seeking security, and we get cut off from God. But God is the One who unconditionally will tell us who we *really* are: we are God's beloved.

And this fearful desire for security cuts us off from other people. If I'm afraid of being hurt, then I can't love, because the only way to love is to be willing to be hurt. That's what love is, the willingness to suffer for somebody else's sake.

If Jesus had fallen prey to that temptation to pursue his own security separate from God, he never would have been able to go to the cross.

It's a perfectly natural instinct to want to belong, to know who we are, but when we let the world tell us, it will be a lie and we won't be who we really are. It's probably not really very tempting to worship the devil, but it is tempting to have the world tell you what you're worth, to find your belonging in status. Sometimes it seems we need all the kingdoms of the earth and their splendor to reassure us— and you'll know by reading the headlines that for some even that isn't enough.

If Jesus had fallen for that temptation he never would have been able to love us. He would have been too busy proving to himself who he was and what he was worth.

So we all have these natural needs to be capable and durable and lovable, and they so easily slip into this obsession for power and security and status separate from God. So how do we deal with that? Think of the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. You notice that Eve saw what was good about the tree. That it was good and that it was helpful to make one wise. Those are good things. The problem is they thought they could be like God— and they wouldn't need God any more.

So how do we overcome that? How do we deal with those temptations? In this Lenten season our work is to repent, and to face our temptations. Now, it's hard to just *not* do something, you need something to *do* to replace what you're *not* supposed to do. It's too easy to just say "Well then don't do that." So what *should* we do?

I think what we do is practice our belovedness. Sometimes we think of our belovedness as sort of a status that we have or a kind of abstract reality. God loves you and that's sort of the end of it. But it's something you have to practice. We have to practice being God's beloved in our prayers.

It's hard to do, to just center ourselves in God's love and meditate on this mystery that God loves us, and just stay there. It's so easy to drift off and start thinking of other things and get wrapped up in our temptations of wanting power and security and identity apart from God. That's to be expected, because our minds are made to wander, That's what's good about them.

But in prayer sometimes what we need to do is to let our minds wander *without* us while we come back and return to God, to our belovedness.

*Centering prayer* is all about simply being mindful of God's love for us and coming back to that mystery moment after moment, thought after thought, letting go of our power and our security and our status and returning to God.

We have to practice our belovedness in our relationships with other people. We have to practice being mindful when we're relating with other people that we are God's beloved. We don't have to be right. We're already God's beloved. We don't have to have the power to make them into people that we like. We don't need any power other than love; and in that powerlessness there is great power. We don't need to find out identity by having others tell us who we are. We know and we trust who we are. We're God's beloved and we can practice that belovedness by sharing it with them.

We can practice our belovedness in our relationships with all the world: every moment of our days to continually remember this miracle and practice it. That's what Jesus had to do in the wilderness, to practice his belovedness and practice coming back to God.

That's why we come to this communion table time after time. We receive life with open, empty hands, powerless to make life for ourselves, grateful for the food we receive only from God, and we practice receiving it. We come in solidarity with the one who died for us, and practice surrendering our security in self-giving. We come in unity with others, not seeking our won status but seeking oneness with all. We live by the Word that comes from the mouth of God. We return to God. Receiving God's own self, given to us in love, we practice our belovedness.

When we do that, when we return to God and continually practice our belovedness it helps us let go of our grasping for power and security and status apart from God. We can trust that we *are* capable, that we *are* lovable, that we *will* survive. And even beyond that, we then become bread for others who are hungry. We become light for people that are struggling in that same wilderness of weakness and temptation—because everybody is struggling in that same wilderness. Everybody's trying to get to that point where they can trust that they *are* capable and durable and lovable. There is utter security in the risk and the self-giving that we practice. There is our deepest identity in being God's. We do more than just overcome our temptations. We shine with the light of God.

