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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

## WHOSE

When I walk through the produce section of the grocery store, I take notice of the various types of fruit there that are presented quite well. The assortment and quality are beautiful, even at this time of year, thanks to shipments coming from various places in the world. They look good, but even if a promotional talking serpent encouraged me to do so, I wouldn't be so tempted to take a bite that I got myself into trouble. I have also been in places where there were a lot of rocks around. I've even been there when I was a bit hungry, but I wasn't tempted to turn those stones into loaves of bread. When the church I served in Georgia constructed a new facility and the cross was being placed on top of the steeple, I got to ride up in a basket lifted by a crane to place the cross on top of the steeple. While I was up there, I felt no enticement to throw myself down to test God's care to see if angels would catch me. At times, I have flown over a variety of countries and have looked down to see them. Not once have I felt the allure to be ruler over all of those places or to worship Satan in order to have that path to power. Let me add, that I'm not trying to pat myself on the back today. I don't think of myself as particularly virtuous for not having experienced these temptations along the way. I dare say that most of you probably haven't been significantly tempted by any of these particular possibilities either. All of that leads me to wonder what the story about temptations faced by Eve and Adam or by Jesus have to do with you and me. In fact, I'm inclined to think these very interesting stories are about someone else that really don't apply to us.

But then it was pointed out to me that the three temptations that Matthew indicates Jesus went through while he was in the wilderness for forty days and nights were the same kinds of temptations in the same order that the Hebrew people faced when they were in the wilderness for forty years. During their period of sojourn there, they had been greatly worried about their own hunger and at times lost their sense of trust that God would provide for them. After that, they wanted to test God to see if there would be provision that would keep them from harm. And then later, they

went through a time when they gave in to false worship as they sought greater power for themselves.

Jesus had just been baptized before this account of his testing. He had been identified by a voice from above as God's beloved Son. But then another voice calls that identity into question, or more specifically, calls into question what kind of Son of God he was going to be? How and for what purpose would he use his power? The first temptation described comes when Jesus is famished. He had been fasting for forty days when he is enticed to turn stones into bread. It would certainly be legitimate for him to feed himself, so we wonder why it is presented as an evil option for Jesus. And yet, there were questions about whether he would focus simply on physical appetites or more broadly on all which could feed one's soul, and whether he would use his power to meet just his own needs or use it to meet the needs of others. Jesus makes clear that his priorities would be directed by what God said and not by anyone else, that his ministry would be broad in its scope and in its target.

In the second temptation, which is to test God's love and care for him by throwing himself off a high place to see if and how God would protect him, Jesus sees that the desire to test God comes not out of a relationship of trust, but from the lack thereof. A decision to test God comes about when we put ourselves in God's position, as we seek to manipulate divine promises to control when, where, and how God is supposed to carry out divine care. It makes God our servant instead of recognizing that we are to be servants of God. However, once again, Jesus focuses on his true identity and did not fall for that kind of enticement.

The third temptation involves the offer of a shortcut, where all the kingdoms of the world are offered to Jesus if he would just give his allegiance to someone other than God. This is the challenge to integrity with an enticement of seeking gain exclusive of having to undergo any pain. Jesus would indeed become Lord over all the kingdoms of the world, but he would do so, not by giving in to that which was evil, even to the extent of giving his own life as a result. Once again Jesus lives out who he is called to be and rejects that potential unfaithful path.

The earlier story about temptation in the second creation story in Genesis, comes in the context where God has defined human vocation to till and keep the garden, has

given broad human permission to meet their human needs, but also has drawn particular boundaries for human behavior. The temptation comes to violate the prohibition, which would also pervert the understanding of the broad divine permission to meet their needs in ways allowed by God, and also would indicate neglect of their initial vocation. Instead of God being recognized as their creator, definer, and provider, God comes to be seen as a barrier to be circumvented. The appetite is not for a particular piece of fruit, but to seek to be in total control over their own lives, as they put aside the notion that they belong to Someone other than themselves and their own whims.

If each of us was to write down what particular actions we would consider to be that which tempt us, we probably would not come up with the same kind of enticements described in our stories from Genesis and Matthew. And yet, these stories do help us to see that the testing of people of faith today does not have to do primarily with temptations to do what we would really like to do but know we shouldn't. These stories from each testament indicate the bigger problem has to do with the challenge of being who God calls us to be as children of God. Just as it was for the Hebrew people, focusing on whose they were, offered them the way to get through their wilderness experience. We find encouragement that the same Jesus who stayed true to his identity and calling in the face of challenge is the Christ who is present with his followers through thick and thin until the end of time.

So we have hope when we are challenged to be other than who we are called to be as beloved children of God who have come through the waters of baptism. Do we belong to the God whose focus is on meeting physical and spiritual needs of all people, not just a few? Then how do we live that out rather than give in to some counter narrative? Do we belong to the One who gives us great freedom in our daily lives but who also puts in place certain constraints for the wellbeing of all? Do we belong to the One who does not hold grudges, but who forgives? Do we belong to the One who is willing to sacrifice on behalf of others? Do we belong to the One whose generosity we see every day? Do we belong to the Lord whose love is broad and deep enough to break down barriers between people? Who is the God to whom we belong? Who is the Christ whom we follow? When we are bewildered by some wilderness experience of grief or fear or deliberation about purpose, let us affirm with our mouths and our actions whose we are. And I dare

say, we will not only make it through our time of trial, we'll relish the rediscovery that we belong to the God who claims us as beloved children. All thanks and praise be unto our God, now and forevermore. Amen.