

Our Current Battle against Evil  
Matthew 4:1-11

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*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Mt. 4:1*

The forty days of Lent are meant to correspond with the forty days and nights Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness before being tempted by the devil, and so numbers of congregations across Christianity are turning to Matthew 4 today and the story of the temptation of Jesus.

There is hardly a more dramatic scene in the New Testament. The key characters are all supernatural. There is the leading Spirit, the tempting devil, the conquering Christ, and, at the end, the ministering angels. The action of the story moves quickly and ominously almost as if designed by a cinema photographer schooled in the art of special effect. There is the trek into the wilderness, with the path becoming bleaker and bleaker as Jesus and the Spirit trudge ahead. There are the empty days and lonely nights of the period of fasting, and these are followed in course by the sinister approach of the devil, the flight to the pinnacle of the temple, and the breath-taking view of all the earth from some high and mysterious vantage point.

As you imagine this scene, complete with the daytime sun, the night time cold, and the sound of the wind sweeping across the strange and empty landscape, I wonder if you think it is all too mythical to be true. There are parts of it, of course, that are too fanciful to have happened in exactly the way described. Where, after all, can you go on earth and see all the kingdoms of the earth? There is no place like that. It can seem too mystical and mythical to be true.

But whatever may have happened then, I have no doubt the very plot of this story happens now. This text telling of the temptation strikes me as a mirror of our time. And so I bring you a teaching sermon this morning that draws upon this text to say something about our present day.

*There is now an on-going battle with evil.*

The text in Matthew, both in English and in Greek, uses three words to name the antagonist of the story. He is called the devil, the tempter, and Satan. Our reading of the text can pause here to comment on the presence of evil.

I don't know what you think about the devil, whether he exists or not. I don't know what I think. Karl Barth may have had it just about right when he suggested it is best not to believe in the devil but to realize at the same time that that is just what the devil wants you to think. It is best, Barth thought, to not even give the devil the time of day.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, tr. by G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Erlich (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), p. 519.

Still, there does seem to be weight behind what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians. He reminded them that “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph.6:12).

We can demythologize that all we like, and perhaps we should demythologize it more than we do, but however we liberalize it, some fact of evil remains present in our world. It is plain enough to see. There is an exasperating, opportunistic, and menacing opposition to goodwill that I do not think can be denied. There is a snake in our garden, something devilish in society, something in the form of attitudes and dispositions and inclinations to lay hold of the best and veer it off its good course. I don’t know how to characterize it completely, but there is evil purpose at work to shatter the Christian Church, destroy the nation, and wreck the world. This much of our text is true today: there is an on-going battle against evil.

*There is a Spirit who leads us into this battle with evil.*

Some years ago I baptized a two-year-old boy. He was no longer an infant but could sit up in the crook of my arm and really pay attention to what was happening. He watched me carefully and suspiciously as I scooped water from the font and baptized him “In the name of the Father.” His eyes followed my hand as it went back to the basin for another scoop of water, and he looked straight at me when I baptized him “In the name of the Son.” Once more his eyes followed my hand to the font, but when I brought it up toward his head to baptize him “In the name of the Spirit,” he ducked! It was as if he wanted no part of this Holy Spirit. It was as if he had already read Matthew 4 and knew where the Spirit leads the baptized.

Jesus, according to the narrative flow in Matthew, had just been baptized in the Jordan. Right when that happened, the Spirit descended upon Jesus and a voice spoke from heaven. The voice said of Jesus, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am pleased” (Mt. 3:17). And the Spirit led Jesus straightaway into the desert to be tempted by the devil. It was as if the Spirit said, “There; you are baptized; you are loved by God; now, go, confront evil face to face.”

Don’t even think to look for a loophole! This is God’s way with believers. The disciples were hoping one day that Jesus would send a number of people – needy and facing existential threats – the disciples were hoping Jesus would send them away to fend for themselves. But Jesus said, “You give them something to eat” (Mt. 14:16). Those same disciples reported for duty another day and Jesus sent them on a mission. Do you remember where? To a posh resort? To a place where the task was easy? No! He sent them “like sheep into the midst of wolves” (Mt. 10:16). Go, confront that face to face.

So this is God’s way with the baptized today. The church that is led by and filled with the Spirit – get ready to duck – the church that is led by and filled with the Spirit cannot stay on its hill and keep itself removed from the controversy of public debate on divisive issues. The church can’t be silent. It can’t be neutral. This much of our text is true today: the Spirit leads us into battle with evil.

*There are temptations that come our way in the battle against evil.*

We can see our temptations reflected in the ones Jesus encountered in the desert.

There is the temptation to gorge ourselves on what is safe, satisfying, and personally fulfilling. Jesus had been practicing the spiritual discipline of fasting in the wilderness, denying himself toward the purpose of drawing closer to God. He had gone without food for an extraordinary amount of time. The devil came along and encouraged him not simply to eat but to gorge himself and wastefully surround himself with his personal preferences. One loaf would have been sufficient for his need, we can imagine, but the devil spoke in plurals. Command stones to become loaves. Command there to be more than you need of what you like.

Well now, you can sense that temptation, can't you? We are tempted – aren't we? – to stare straight into the evil now opposing to good, the evil trying to diminish the church of Jesus Christ, trying to destroy the nation, and wreck the world – we are tempted to stare straight into that and do nothing about it. Better not rock the boat, we say; better not offend anyone. Stay safe; keep to what people will like; be noncontroversial; stick with what you know will be pleasing.

Where there isn't the temptation to play it safe and to abundantly satisfy ourselves, there is the temptation to question the reality of goodness. Faith is largely a matter of trust. The Book of Hebrews will tell us, in that famous definition, that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the confidence of things unseen (Heb. 11:1). Jesus had just heard – as little as six weeks ago – that he was the Beloved Son of God with God is pleased (Mt. 3:17). The devil now entices Jesus to throw that into question. There wasn't anything right there to prove it, the devil wanted to say. Doubt the reality of goodness. Get God to prove it.

Well now, you can sense that very temptation around us, can't you? Evil is so blatant. We see the blatant evil. We hardly have to look for it. But where is the good? Good is so much harder to see. We are led to doubt it exists. We are led to doubt God exists.

There is the temptation to do only that we know to be pleasing and there is the temptation to doubt there is any good at all. The text invites us to see as well that there is a third temptation we face: the temptation of worship what is false. The devil tries to entice Jesus to worship him rather than God. It is the most heinous of the temptations for it is the temptation to put the devil in the place of God, to call the evil good, to honor the prince of lies, and to bow before the spirit of deception as though he were king of kings and lord of lords.

Well now, hasn't the standard weakened among us? Who or what is being worshiped today? The truth or the lie? God or money? Justice or advantage? Righteousness or what will win? The God who never sleeps or our own work? We are still tempted to put wrong on the throne and to worship incompetent falsehood.

This much of our text is true today: we are tempted: tempted to avoid the issue we are meant to face, tempted to doubt the loving presence of God, and tempted to fight on the wrong side of what's troubling earth.

*There are resources to help us prevail in the battle against evil.*

When the Spirit leads us in confrontation against evil the Spirit does not leave us empty-handed. There are resources we are meant to use.

There is the wealth of scripture. Every one of our Lord's answers to the devil is a quotation from the Bible, in particular, from the Book of Deuteronomy. The Bible is rich with heal for us, too. It may not contain a clear answer to every specific problem, but it contains sure guidance. If we still to its proven pathway of neighborliness, openness, kindness, peace, patience, gentleness, and generosity we can blunt evil and support the good.

There is the richness of worship along with the wealth of scripture. It is in the end the thought of the worship of God that sends the devil running. Worship brings to the surface of our lives regular reminders of what is true, valuable, and honorable. It models the beauty of community and equity in these days of division and suspicion.

And let's not leave out those who appear at the end of the story told in our text: the ministering angels. When the devil leaves, ministering angels soon appear. That they are at hand so immediately suggests to me that they were hovering over the scene all the time. Jesus was not alone in the desert and neither are we. Hebrews says we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1). These are the departed saints to whom we have bid earth's farewell and who have gone home to heaven. They nevertheless keep their interest in us. Their love doesn't die. Surely they intercede for us in the struggle for justice and peace.

This much of our text is true today: we have in the Spirit, in the scriptures, in worship, and in the fellowship of heaven all the resources we need to succeed in our battle with evil.

So this exposition of the temptation story in Matthew has shown it to be not a distant fantasy. It is a mirror reflection of life today. There is a battle against evil. We are sent straight into it. We are tempted to avoid it, doubt God's presence, and to fight on the wrong side. But, thank God, the Lord has given us resources to help in the struggle. Let us draw upon these resources, rise above temptation, and be bold in the struggle for justice and peace.