

February 10, 2008
The First Sunday in Lent

“Why Not Eat?”

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And 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,

"Man shall 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 set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said 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,
lest you strike your foot against a stone."*

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall 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 glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

"You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."

Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

Sermon

Why not eat? No, I'm not proposing a new mission statement for our church. This is the question that often struck me when I used to hear the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Scripture makes it clear that Jesus has ample reason to eat. *"And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry."* Hungry has got to be an understatement. Jesus must have been starving. This wasn't the type of fast where you just don't eat between sunup and sundown. This was forty days AND nights—nothing but water.

So when we're told Satan came along and said, *"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread,"* I used to say "Why not?" It's not like He'd be giving away a secret. They both know Jesus is the Son of God and can easily turn stones to bread. Jesus' answer really didn't help me either. *"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"* Okay, so why not eat? Say grace first, read your Bible, but eat.

What I realized later on in life was that I wasn't connecting the devil's temptation to what came before it. At the end of Matthew Three we have the baptism of Jesus leading right into our Gospel lesson for today. *"And behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.' Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into*

the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”

Why was Jesus out there fasting? It is at the Spirit’s leading. It is God’s will and desire that Jesus be there. Jesus is living by every word that comes from the mouth of God by obeying God’s Spirit. To eat would be to exert His power against the will of the Father. It would be to not trust the Father that all of this will work out for good. The devil would like nothing better than for Jesus to say, “It’s too hard. It’s too painful. I’m going to work around the will of the Father to make things easier on myself.” Jesus doesn’t do it.

Jesus is obedient; trusting in complete faith in His father to work what is right and good through His will. Very unlike that other son of God I spoke about a few weeks ago—remember the words of God spoken through the prophet Hosea, “*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.*” That son, the nation of Israel, also went out into the wilderness after being freed from Egypt through great and awesome deeds of God. Yet as soon as they got hungry, they grumbled against God. They repeatedly failed to trust in Him, despite all He kept on doing for them. In this they sinned against God. Christ here is all of Israel in a single man, but He is doing things right. He is perfectly obedient to His father’s will.

At the place called Massah the children of Israel tested God, demanding water. They wanted proof God was there. They asked themselves, “Is God among us or not?” When Satan brings Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, Jesus refuses to test the Father, but trusts and follows the Father’s will. It’s interesting that Satan quotes Psalm 91 in tempting Christ, but he conveniently leaves out the part right in the middle where it says how the angels will “*guard you in you in all your ways.*” Jesus’ ways are the Father’s ways. There is no need to test. He knows the Father will protect Him according to the Father’s will.

The final temptation is straightforward and direct; worship something other than God. Jesus immediately rejects the idea with an order, “Be gone, Satan!” The former son, Israel, often ran after false gods, but Jesus is faithful. His trust in the Father is perfect and complete.

All of these temptations at the beginning of His ministry ring as an echo at the end of it, as Jesus hangs on the cross. “Save yourself!” the crowd yells. Jesus does not. His death is the will of the Father. He trusts and obeys. “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now,” said the chief priests, scribes and Pharisees. Christ does not cry out to the Father for rescue and test His power, He quietly trusts and lets God’s will be done. Jesus lets all that this worldly life has to offer bleed away. The thought of turning on the Father to save Himself is anathema to Him. His worship and faith is in the Father always.

So what do we do with this temptation of Christ? Is this our playbook in the face of temptation? Is that what this is all about? Holy Scripture surely works to build up our faith and through that strengthens us in the face of temptation. But this story seems to tell us a lot more about Christ than it does about us.

This tells us that right off the bat in His ministry Jesus Christ beats Satan. Satan’s whole purpose here is to try and knock Christ off the path the Father has laid out for Him. It’s almost as if right here at the beginning, Satan is trying to keep Christ off of the cross. If Jesus is going to save Himself here, or double-check if the Father will save Him, or chase after worldly treasure and splendor, He’d surely do the same thing when facing a torturous death on the cross. Christ will have none of it now or later. He is perfect. He follows the path the Father has laid out for Him, right to the bloody end. He is the obedient Son of God.

But because this story is about Christ, it is about us. This story is about the obedient son of God as opposed to the other son, the rebellious and disobedient son that was Israel. And we’re

called on again and again in the face of temptation to figure out where we fall here. When we're faced with a sin to feast on, our sinful nature is always going to whisper, "Why not eat?" Our sinful mind is going to be able to come up with all sorts of ways to rationalize the sin. That part of us is going to grumble against God, hungry for sin and wanting to taste it.

But the truth is that we look at the Christ, victorious here and victorious on the cross, and we can say, "Wait a minute—I'm that Son! I'm that child of God! I'm the one who faithfully walks in the way of the Father." It doesn't make sense, but because Christ did it right we get to be the ones who did it right too!

Paul tells us in Romans that this is how it is. *"As one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."* In God's great mercy, that's how it works. In Galatians Paul makes very clear which son we are. *"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'"* So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."

Look to Christ's example here not just as an example of how you and I can combat temptation and sin. See it for what it really is, the truth of how through Christ sin has already been defeated in us. See Christ's victory here leading to Christ's victory on the cross. Know the Father is faithful to His Son, and to His adopted sons and daughters. The angels came and ministered to Jesus after the temptation. God is faithful. Jesus was raised to eternal life after three days and returned to a place of glory in heaven. God is faithful. Through faith we are given the righteousness of Christ leading to salvation. God is faithful.

So when temptation rears its lovely and enticing head, go ahead and ask yourself, "Why not eat?" And then answer, "Because I am a son or daughter of God through Christ. I walk in God's will with Christ. This hunger for sin is no longer mine, for I trust in God's provision." Through Christ we are made perfect. Why not eat? Because we can look past the sad meals this fallen world offers to the heavenly banquet God has prepared for we sons and daughters in Christ.