

Temptation or Test?
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
January 20, 2019

Matthew 4:1-17

Is this scene about Jesus being tempted or being tested?

In the original Greek, it could go either way, either translation is adequate.

I think the difference matters.

For example:

Food. Oh yea, that's a temptation we can imagine, anyone trying to lose those extra pounds gained at Christmas time can sympathize with Jesus. Americans spend around 33 billion each year on weight loss plans, which is kind of ironic given the food insecurities many people wrestle with. Jesus has been fasting, on purpose, for a long time. And it is no surprise to him that he is hungry, and no sin to look ahead to the ending of the fast. He's Jesus, he can eat when he wants.

But the thing about jumping off the tippy-top of the Temple is a little tougher to imagine, since no one in her right mind would do something like that. The default interpretation, (that no one should test God), seems a little beside the point, even if it is Jesus who says it. I don't know many people, outside of daredevil teenage boys, who would be tempted to jump off a building just for fun.

And then there's Kingdoms. Most of us will never get the chance to exert our power on a massive, worldwide scale. So far, 45 men have been elected president of the United States. Historians tell us that each was, in some measure, at some moment, inadequate to the task. For the rest of us, we do our jobs; we carry out our responsibilities, but how much (really) hangs in the balance?

That's why, if this scene is meant to spur our own personal reflections on resisting temptation, it doesn't really hit the mark. I'm not going to be jumping off any bridges or running for president anytime soon.

What if, instead of a temptation, it's a three-part test?

Many of you are teachers, and if you are not a teacher you are or have been a student. Testing is a part of education, and it always has a purpose.

Testing, first of all, shows students what they have not yet understood, the areas they still need to work on, so that they can set their sights on future learning.

Testing also, and just as importantly, shows the teacher what they have not succeeded in teaching yet. What happens in a classroom if all the students fail a test? Well, that's a pretty good indication that the teacher needs to look at the material he or she is using to teach. Perhaps, if just a percentage of the students failed, there might be shared characteristics that led to them not mastering the material. Sometimes, the teacher will discover that most everyone has missed a key point, and that's important to know so that it can be re-addressed. Back to the drawing board.

Testing provides an occasion for candidates to demonstrate that they are ready to practice the profession for which they have been preparing. Nurses must pass the NCLEX (National Council Licensure Examination) before being allowed to begin their work as a Registered Nurse. If you've ever been in the hospital, and you've watched a nurse establish an IV or catch a doctor's error on a prescription or catch a newborn in the delivery room, I'm sure you are glad about that. If you are a homeowner, you're probably glad that most of the contractors who have worked on your house passed a state licensing exam, so that you never have to use the words "creative" and "plumber" in the same sentence.

Testing matters. It keeps the world safe.

That's why I think this little scene in Matthew's story is kind of like Jesus' passing his licensure exam.

The first exam, involving bread, is not as simple as it seems. His response to those hunger pangs is meant to remind us that when human beings go off the tracks, we lose our balance in two key areas: aspiration and appetite.

In Genesis 3, when Eve is given a chance to "be like God," she reaches for something that will ultimately lead to ruin. But it is not the fact of aspiration that is the problem. Human beings MUST aspire, or we would never have moved out of being hunter-gatherers living in caves.

But it's also true that some aspirations are foolish, or destructive, or simply impossible. If at this point in my life I aspired to be a Broadway actress, I hope that someone would help me get back into balance before I ruined my family's finances and my own mental health trying to do something for which

I am so unequipped. Aspirations can be powerful, but they must be balanced.

Let's not forget Adam, who was apparently standing next to Eve the whole time. When she handed him the fruit, he just ate it. Adam is all appetite. No questions, no pondering, no hesitation. Gulp. He ate it. And then he went back to watching the game on TV. Or something like that.

In the wilderness, Jesus is also being tested for his ability to balance appetite and aspiration. Can he control his appetite? Sure! He shows himself capable of the basic self-control expected of anyone. So far, so good.

The test on the Temple top is also a test of aspiration, but a specially focused one. At his baptism just a moment ago, Jesus was presented as the messiah, but is he really equipped to carry out that dangerous task? An unbalanced messiah is a danger not only to himself, but also to the entire world.

That's why the tester directs him to jump off the Temple. Imagine a messiah who was not subject to the law of gravity or human limitation. What kind of theology might flow from that? If the body of the Christ is not subject to gravity, are we also not subject to gravity? And if we are not subject to the laws of nature, are we also not subject to moral laws? You can see how it has the potential to get ugly fast. "Don't test the LORD your God," says Jesus. Good advice.

The last test is clearly a messiah-specific one. The Tester knows that this messiah carries the task of turning the world right-side-up. Imagine a messiah who has the sheer power to do that. Seriously, imagine that.

As a people, we have often imagined that the best peace-maker is to build a bigger bomb. And we have often found ourselves in the midst of desperate warfare which did indeed call for bigger and more destructive weaponry. But WWII was followed by Korea, which was followed by Vietnam, which was followed by a flurry of smaller wars, one after another. A broken world will go to war again and again, out of tragic necessity.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr was a leader who offered a different take on wielding power, one that was heavily informed by his Christian faith. In his 1957 essay entitled "The Power of Non-Violence", he describes what it was like to make change without employing physical force or violence:

"From the very beginning there was a philosophy undergirding the Montgomery boycott, the philosophy of nonviolent resistance.... it didn't make sense to most of the people in the beginning. We had to use our mass meetings to explain nonviolence to a community of people who had never heard of the philosophy and in many instances were not sympathetic with it... We had to make it clear that nonviolent resistance is not a method of cowardice... The nonviolent resister is just as opposed to the evil that he is standing against as the violent resister... He does not seek to humiliate or defeat the opponent but to win his friendship and understanding. The end of violence or the aftermath of violence is bitterness. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community... in the end is reconciliation, (in) the end is redemption."

I don't think the message here today is about how we, like Jesus, can resist temptation in three easy steps. I think it's more about the two of the biggest issues we encounter on our journey: loneliness and identity. So many of our neighbors don't have a place they think of as home – a "thick" community in which people know and look out for one another and invest in relationships that are not transient. That feeling of aloneness catches us when we think no one sees us. The sense of "not belonging" tries to call into question who we are.

The trick, of course, is learning how to intentionally invest in the places where we actually live. In other words, being a member of a community isn't about how I feel about the place I put my roots, it is about the neighbor *I choose to be with* in the community I wind up calling my home.

And there lies the challenge to each of us, living in a country suffering from loneliness and ripped apart by political opportunists seeking to capitalize on that isolation. Each of us can be happier, and our society will start to heal, when we become the kind neighbors and generous friends we wish we had. Beloved community.

My hope and prayer is that you'll discover who you are isn't rooted in your skills, or gifts, or personality but in the mission you've been given to reflect God in the world. Your identity is that you're dearly loved by the Creator and the Creator has purposed you to live this love out in the world despite all that would work against it. Following Christ means participating in a way of life in which we will be tested. Sometimes we'll pass the test. Sometimes we'll have to go back and study up. We will face challenges living a life of serving others, with all the sacrifices that entails. But isn't love worth it? Amen.