

Three of a Kind
Matthew 4:1-11

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In the Bible there is a magic to the number forty. You can almost call to mind the many references:

The flood lasts forty days and forty nights (Gen 7)

The death ritual for Jacob requires forty days (Gen 50)

The Israelites wander in the wilderness 40 years (Ex 16)

Moses is suspended on Sinai for forty days and nights (Ex 24)

The exploration of Canaan takes forty days (Num 13)

The Israelites are controlled by the Philistines for 40 years (Judges 13)

For 40 days Goliath taunts the Israelites (I Sam 17)

Elijah flees for his life and travels 40 days and nights to mount Horeb. (I Kings 19)

Ezekiel lies on his right side for forty days (Ez 29)

The time between Jonah warning the Ninevites and catastrophe is forty days (Jonah 3)

Jesus' fasting and temptations in the wilderness last forty days and nights (Matt 4)

Resurrection appearances occur in a forty day interval between resurrection and ascension (Acts 1)

Forty days, forty years. Forty. In Biblical terms crossing the threshold into this symbolic span of time provides for transition and transformation, both for the individual and collective. It requires us to leave the old and familiar behind and search out the new. The sacred interval is often messy as our old identity is in question and all the balls are in the air. You are familiar with many of these passages yourselves: You experience a calamity, someone gets a new job or leaves home for school, marriage and children and grandchild send us into a new stage. We go through a divorce or go to war and return home. Entire groups pass through these difficult and disorienting passages, such as national elections or hurricanes and earthquakes that destroy everything around us.

These are all number forty type events. And no matter how difficult and how challenging the Spirit is at work bringing a new people and a new creature out of them.

And that brings us to Jesus in the wilderness. It is a classic number 40 experience, a time of testing inbetween chapters, the essential transformational time to prepare him for the next chapter of his destiny. And in a sense the kind of wilderness testing he endures is required of all people on powerful spiritual journeys.

His time of fasting and setting his mind unreservedly on God has left him weakened and famished. He is at his most vulnerable even as we are all at our most vulnerable when under great stress or stark deprivation. And the challenges are three and they are universal.

The first temptation goes straight to his most basic needs. He is hungry and the temptation is to “turn stone into bread.” He is tempted to break the fast and instead feed his hunger.

And that is always our first and greatest temptation, *the temptation to security.*

Why do you think it is that interrogators attack the basic human needs level first in order to break a person down? Food, water, sleep, protection from the elements, physical discomfort. It’s the most basic level. And the most natural response in the world is to meet those needs. Why then is it such a temptation?

Unless you master your response to those basic security needs you are forever beholden to them. They become your master and you their slave.

So Jesus resists this temptation with an affirmation, that we are not meant to live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the Spirit. In other words, you cannot become obsessed with your security. Why? Because to be obsessed with security is to be controlled by fear. I am terrified I won’t have or someone will take what I need, what I want.

As long as I'm terrified that I will not have enough, that I'm never safe, I will be preoccupied with real or perceived threats – and I will never be free. I will be trapped by my own fear of deprivation and therefore ever suspicious of the neighbor. My life will be one long story of trying to turn the stones of scarcity into the bread of security.

This is as true for individuals as it is for families, for groups, for nations. Those who are always preoccupied with their security needs can never fully live and love because they are dominated by fear.

No, Jesus says, I'm not turning stones into bread.

The second temptation is more subtle because it is a psychological or spiritual test. In the second Jesus is tempted to throw himself off the temple wall to the stones below. And why not? Doesn't he believe that angels will swoop in to save him at the last moment?

This is subtle because you have to ask what is behind a temptation like this? Why would you ever want or desire to do something like that? For a person of capacity like Jesus, there is always a temptation to test God to prove just how spiritual we are.

You can see this by the way Jesus refutes it: Quoting scripture he says that we are not to test the Lord our God. Get it? The temptation presents it all backwards – it is God who should be testing us and not the other way around! We should not strive to put God and others at our disposal but rather put ourselves at the disposal of God.

There is often a deep infantile impulse to be the center of the world, to make the world revolve around us – let the world stop, watch me, and save me at the last. And ... let them all gasp in admiration and awe. This is the temptation to narcissism and grandiosity.

No, says Jesus, I won't be drawing the attention to myself and how important I am. I will be pointing toward God. Anytime a person draws attention to their capacity to prove that they are supposedly greater than any other you know just how insecure they are ... and how their spirituality is out of whack.

No, says Jesus, do not put the Lord your God to the test.

The third temptation is one that has always made the world go around. Jesus stands on top of a mountain, gazing out over every kingdom that the eye can see, and then it comes: *All this can be yours.*

This is the lust for power and everything power can bring – wealth, status, control. And the lust for power moves on every level of our humanity, from the family to tribes to parties to nations. And what people will do and do to others for the sake of power is shattering.

For the sake of power people will violate others, attack and undermine others, take resources from others, wage war against others, discriminate against others. All for the sake of gaining, having, and keeping power.

The only problem with striving for absolute power is that you have to sell your soul to get it. This is the theme, of course, of Goethe's *Faust*. You can make a deal with the devil but in the end you're losing ... everything. "All this can be yours," says the tempter to Jesus casting a wave over all the kingdoms." But down in the fine print of the contract there is one tricky little clause: "If you will bow down and worship me."

You can have it all if you compromise yourself. You can have it all if you forego your values. You can have it all if you are willing to trade in your birthright for a bowl of porridge.

If you are a fan of *Lord of the Rings* you know that it is the wizards who face the greatest temptation.

It is the person of capacity who is most tempted to take the greatest power. So a king or warrior or wizard or queen of the elves must choose if he or she will serve the dark forces or not. The temptation is great, but so is the liberation when refused.

If you have ever watched a mini-series like *The Tudors* or *House of Cards* you have a fine portrayal of how this works in politics. People of virtue who won't compromise themselves to get what they want are often the ones who lose their heads. The ones who are willing to be ruthless, on the other hand, can eventually snatch the golden ring – but at a great cost to their souls.

The way that power is usually taken, whether in the Roman Empire or American Empire, is by consolidating big money, expanded military might and a security state that slowly but surely removes freedom and rights from rank and file citizens, all under the banner of protecting you. The *Pax Romana* was a brutal peace, secured by great military force that crushed the slightest opposition.

The Third Reich depended on systematic oppression of targeted groups and a reign of terror conducted by the SS. The Nazi's power base depended on a propaganda machine that controlled all information. What is the first goal of a fascist government, such as in Pinochet's Chile or North Korea or Russia? Control the media, destroy the journalists, delegitimize and shut down the newspapers, take over the radio stations and news outlets. In Hitler's rise to power this was essential. That's why Nazi Germany immediately established a "Minister of Propaganda." That post was occupied by the notorious Joseph Goebbels.

Such is the lust for power and the temptation to it. Absolute power consolidates itself by controlling the money, military and security apparatus, and information and media. It violates other nations through intimidation, occupation and the removal of their wealth. And this all takes place slowly, insidiously, methodically, while people are either too scared to resist or asleep at the switch.

“All of this can be yours,” said the voice of temptation to Jesus, “if you will worship me.” And Jesus replied, “Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.”

That, by the way, is the core confession of the *Barmen Declaration*, a statement put out by the underground church in Germany during Hitler’s reign of terror.

As Hitler demanded absolute loyalty they stated that “We have one Lord of heaven and earth.” The state church, the official church, had sold its soul to the powers and principalities of the time, propping up the Reich through their tacit support. The underground church of all times and places knows the difference between the rulers of this world and our one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And they worship God alone.

Resist the temptations to:

- Turn stones into bread – be obsessed with your security needs

- Jump off the temple – to garner the attention of all, including God, and attempt to put them at your disposal
- Seek all the kingdoms of the world – to lust after power and the many forms in which it comes

There is a terse conclusion statement in this text that people often overlook. I suppose that is easy to do following such a dramatic story.

It says that at the conclusion of all these tests, these temptations, the duration of which we do not know – the angels came and ministered to Him. Imagine that.

If you have ever been engaged in the great struggle of the soul, whatever that is, you know that there are consolations in the aftermath, a great unexpected pool of strength that comes only to those who have passed through the liminal wilderness, the number forty of the spirit.

You who have weathered great loss and deep grief know the way that you have been strengthened in the inner person. It is beyond description. Those who have endured suffering, stood for the right even when it meant swimming upstream against the current, and refused to take the easier low road but instead took the harder high road because of principle, will know what it is like to sleep well, to have a satisfied mind, and enjoy perfect freedom when the angels minister to them. Those are the consolations that come not from the kingdoms of this world, but of God's.