

“NOT DARKNESS, BUT LIGHT”

Matthew 4:1-11; Ephesians 5:6-20

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Every year, Lent seems the same: the same questions (what are you giving up?), and the same stories (the wilderness, Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the man born blind, the raising of Lazarus, the triumphal entry, the Last Supper and the crucifixion). I find Jesus' encounter with Satan in the wilderness among the most tiresome of this "sameness." The belief in a personal demon, whose name is Satan, strikes me as a distraction from the main thrust of the story. The effort to parse each temptation into the perfect metaphor for contemporary temptations seems a bit strained, the product of analyzing the story with the head apart from the heart. The fact that there are three temptations lends itself to the traditional three points and a poem format of some sermons, generally a bit pedantic and dull frankly.

Timothy A. Beach-Verhey sees this story as a test confirming Jesus as the true Messiah. "Forty days in the wilderness," he writes, "would assure Matthew's audience that this really is the 'Son of God'" (p. 50). The story directly reflects Israel's forty years in the wilderness after being liberated from Egypt. They faced these same temptations. They failed the test every time. The book of Hebrews summarizes the point nicely. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

It may true that this is what the story is about, but that doesn't make it interesting or less frustrating. It only raises more questions for us today. Does Jesus' perfection make him less human and more divine? Does that difference make him less relevant? Today, we prefer our heroes to be flawed, so much so that the term anti-hero has pretty much fallen out of use. If the point of the story is to establish Jesus' authenticity as the Messiah, one wonders about its usefulness for us. More distractions.

It may not sound like it, but I do actually enjoy preaching in Lent. The other stories have a complexity and depth that I feel I have not begun to exhaust. This story, has however, repeatedly left an unsatisfied taste in my mouth. I'm feeling a need for a new lens to see it through. When I came across the Ephesians passage that we read this morning, I thought I had it. We are urged to "Live as children of light."

What if, instead of focusing on repentance and sacrifice, we turn our attention to what it means "to live as children of light." What if we worried less about falling to temptation and focused on the right thing, the good thing, the healthy thing to pursue?

Instead of food for the body, we might focus more on our hunger for righteousness. What's going to feed our souls, nurture our spirits? What's going to build community and lead to justice? We are right to be concerned about bread for the body. This is part of our call to care for the "least of these." But to live as children of light is to live "by every word that

proceeds out of the mouth of God” as Jesus says in the wilderness. And he’ll take this truth into his teaching as well. “Do not worry about what you will eat or drink,” he says in the Sermon on the Mount, “... but seek first the kingdom of God....”

Paul urges this way of living when he writes to the church in Ephesus. “Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord... Understand the will of the Lord.” Live as children of light means that we focus less on what’s happening in our stomachs and more on the word and call of God, less on the temptation and more on the goal, less on our failure and more on the possibilities, less on fear and more on love.

Seen this way, the wilderness story doesn’t highlight the difference between Jesus’ perfection, his ability to resist the devil, and our imperfections or tendency to fall into temptation. We may not do it flawlessly, but many people say no to food for the sake of a higher calling. How many times has a hunger strike initiated the righting of an injustice?

Instead of the presumption of our high status as children of God, we might focus more on humility. “If you are the Son of God,” says Satan, “Throw yourself down,” knowing that God will save you. There is a quiet confidence in children of light that doesn’t need to prove their worth before others. To be loved by God is not the same as claiming God for one’s side. It isn’t always true that God is on our side, especially when putting God to the test, especially when presuming our own righteousness. God humbles those who are arrogant, the scriptures tell us. Better not to put God to the test. Better, as Ephesians puts it, to “be careful how we live, not as those who are unwise but as those who are wise. Better to give thanks for God’s mercy, than presume upon God’s stamp of approval.

Instead of seeking wealth or power, we ought to think on things genuinely worthy of praise and on ways to serve. As children of light, the emphasis isn’t on acquisition of wealth or prestige, but on living in ways that please God. In the end, it isn’t about our failure to live up to our image of the perfect Jesus, but about the possibility of walking in the light and the love of God.

The wilderness story isn’t a test confirming Jesus’ perfection. It isn’t a call to resist temptation or a reminder of our failings. It’s an invitation to walk in the light of Christ, to turn away from darkness and toward the light. It’s an invitation to listen to what God is saying to us, an invitation to embrace humility, and an invitation to learn the things that matter more than the size of your bank account and more than the title you hold.

Lent is a season for repentance, but not the repentance that seeks after perfection. We might do better with Lent, if we focused less on our flaws and more on living into the light of God. It might be easier to turn away from the dark, if we thought more about turning toward the light. Well, that’s what we’re hoping to do this Lent. May God bless us as we learn more about living as children of light. Amen.