

“The Devil Couldn’t Make Jesus Do It”
Matthew 4:1-11; Psalm 23

For many sports fans, March is the best time of the year. Both professional basketball and hockey are in the middle of their seasons and professional baseball begins its spring training games, but what makes it the best for so many is March Madness, the NCAA basketball championship. Now I don’t know about you, but I can’t think about college basketball championships without thinking about John Wooden. I never watched him coach, but looking back and seeing what he was able to accomplish is truly amazing.

Wooden won 10 NCAA basketball championships at UCLA, and between January 30, 1971 and January 17, 1974, his teams won 88 straight games. Both of these are records that will probably never be broken. But, in my opinion, what made Wooden the best coach ever was the fact that he did not limit what he taught his players to basketball. He was continually trying to help them focus on who they were and how they lived their lives teaching them the importance of making good decisions on the court and in life.

It is said that of the 180 players who played for him, Wooden knows the whereabouts of 172. Of course, it’s not hard when most of them call, checking on his health, secretly hoping to hear some of his simple life lessons. "Discipline yourself, and others won't need to... Never lie, never cheat, never steal... Earn the right to be proud and confident." And he believed in hopelessly out-of-date stuff that never did anything but win championships. No dribbling behind the back or through the legs. "There's no need," he'd say. And no UCLA basketball number was retired under his watch. "What about the fellows who wore that number before? Didn't they contribute to the team?" he'd say.

And if you played for him, you played by his rules no matter who you were: Never score without acknowledging a teammate. One word of profanity and you're done for the day. Treat your opponent with respect. No long hair, no facial hair. "They take too long to dry, and you could catch cold leaving the gym," he'd say. That one drove his players crazy. One day, All-America center Bill Walton showed up with a full beard. "It's my right," Walton insisted. Wooden asked if he believed that strongly. Walton said he did. "That's good, Bill," Coach said. "I admire people who have strong beliefs and stick by them, I really do. We're going to miss you." Walton shaved it right then and there. Now Walton calls once a week to tell Coach he loves him. Wooden’s character was second to none. In Matthew 3:13 and following, which is the scripture directly before this morning’s reading, we hear the account of Jesus’ baptism and we gain the understanding that Jesus is God’s son. But it is in our reading this morning, that the character of the Son of God is revealed to us.

After Jesus was baptized we read that a voice from heaven, God’s voice, says, “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” After an affirmation like this, one would assume that Jesus is primed and ready to take on the world. But in the very next verse, we hear, “Then the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil.”

A minister parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was short on time and couldn't find a space with a meter. Then he put a note under the windshield wiper that read: "I have circled the block 10 times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. Forgive us our debts." When he returned, he found a citation from a police officer along with this note. "I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket, I'll lose my job. Lead us not into temptation."

If we read the Gospel of Mark's account of this same scene, instead of hearing that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, we hear, "The Spirit drove him out into the wilderness, where he stayed forty days, being tempted by Satan."

Either way, whether the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness or forcefully pushed him there, we notice, as Hubert Beck a retired minister from Austin, Texas says, "Temptation did not come looking for Jesus. Rather, Jesus is thrust into the teeth of temptation."

He is no longer in the relative safety of those who had gathered as he was baptized and those who had heard the affirmation that he is God's son... Jesus is alone in the wilderness and he is about to face his tempter.

When I was a kid, I always pictured the Devil as this long tailed red creature with pointy ears, horns, and a wicked smile on his face. Sometimes I thought of him as someone on my shoulder urging me to sin and other times as someone watching me off in the distance with his pitchfork in hand ready to strike me down when I least expected it. But what we find in our scripture is that the Devil is much more of a conversation partner than someone we'd find in a horror movie. He simply challenges Jesus, appealing to his sense of need, in what turns out to be a kind of spiritual debate.

The Devil came to Jesus knowing that the time was right to strike, and he said, "Hey look, you're hungry. It's been forty days. Make yourself something to eat. You're no good to anyone if you die of hunger." But Jesus resists sighting scripture saying, "People do not live by bread alone." So the devil ups the ante a bit. He takes him to Jerusalem and sets him on the highest point of the Temple and now the devil sights scripture of his own saying, "If you are God's son show us. The scriptures say that God will command his angels to protect you so that not even your foot will be hurt. Throw yourself down and prove it to us. Throw yourself down and prove it to yourself." Jesus replies, "It is also written, do not put the Lord your God to the test." So the devil has one more little trick up his sleeve. He takes Jesus out to a mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and says, "Look all this is mine, but if you bow down and worship me, it can all be yours." But Jesus says, "Go away from me Satan for the scriptures say, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

The devil never spits fire or threatens him with a pitchfork. He simply tries to show Jesus how easy it would be to make his situation better.

Three USC students... that's the University of Southern California, I know better than to talk about any colleges around here... three USC students were taking a chemistry class and all of them had A's. So the weekend before their final exam, they decided to visit some friends and have a big party. They had a great time but after the long night they slept all day Sunday and didn't make it back to USC until early Monday morning. Rather than taking the final then, they decided that after the final they would explain to their professor why they missed it. They said that they visited friends but on the way back they had a flat tire. As a result, they missed the final. The professor agreed they could make up the final the next day. The guys were excited and relieved, and they studied all that night for the exam. The next day the Professor placed them in separate rooms and gave them each a test booklet. They quickly answered the first problem worth 5 points: What is the common word for H₂O? Each one thinking this is going to be easy. Then they turned the page. On the second page was written... For 95 points: Which tire?

When we perceive a need in our lives, whether self inflicted or not, temptations hit us the hardest. It is at that moment when we find ourselves caught in the conversation

debating whether to resist our temptations or to just give in to our desires. When we are running late for a meeting, the temptation is to speed. When we are short on cash and we get too much change back at the grocery store, the temptation is to keep quiet. When we are caught doing something wrong, the temptation is to pass the blame or to simply lie to cover ourselves. In my first draft of this sermon I had about two pages dedicated to steroid use in baseball, but then I fought my own temptations and took them out.

In the wilderness, Jesus faces real needs of his own. Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann asks, “Is Jesus to use whatever powers he possesses to satisfy his own needs, or does he rely for nurture and support on divine grace? Does he dare to think that God’s words will suffice?”

In the end Jesus stands strong in the face of his tempter and he tells Satan to leave, and Satan does. In the end, we find that “it is not Satan who has power over Jesus, but Jesus who issues commands that Satan obeys. To be sure, Satan will return, but the secret in keeping the tempter at bay is out; it is in being faithful to one’s vocation to be God’s child, clinging tenaciously to the divine calling.”

Satan... the devil... the tempter...

Bible scholar William Barclay says, “We must not think of this experience of Jesus as an outward experience. It was a struggle that went on in his heart, mind, and soul. The proof of this is that there is no possible mountain from which all the kingdoms of the earth could be seen. This is an inner struggle. It is through our inmost thoughts and desires that the tempter comes to us. His attack is launched in our own minds.”

But now the question is why do we hear about these three specific temptations? Is this all that Jesus faced in the wilderness?

If we go back to Jesus’ baptism, we hear the declaration from heaven once again, “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” So why is he here? Why now? What is he supposed to do? I believe that these questions and more are what drove him into the wilderness. Jesus himself is searching for the answers.

Does he know that he is here to set things right? Does he know that he is here to save the world? Does he know the mission that lies before him and the method by which he is going to complete it?

The devil came to him, “Hey look, you’re hungry. Turn these stones into bread.”

There’s a lot of hungry people in the world. If Jesus fed them all, if he showed them that he had the power to wipe away their hunger, to wipe away their physical needs with a single word, he could get the people to follow him for sure. But people do not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds through the mouth of God. Feeding them all would satisfy their physical needs, but Jesus had something more to offer than food.

So the devil takes him to Jerusalem and sets him on the highest point of the Temple and says, “If you are God’s son show us. The scriptures say that God will command his angels to protect you so that not even your foot will be hurt.”

Imagine what would happen if Jesus leapt down into the temple courtyard... imagine the amazement on the people’s faces as he is lowered safely to the ground in front of their very eyes by angels. Jesus could show them that he was the real deal. He could show them that he has the power to do whatever needs to be done because God will not allow him to be hurt... God will not allow him to fail.

But it is written, do not put the Lord your God to the test. Jesus knows that his path is not to win people over by putting on a show for the crowds. Jesus could perform and get people to follow him, but faith based on the wonders of the eye is not faith at all.

So the devil takes Jesus out to a mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and says, "Look all this is mine, but if you bow down and worship me, it can all be yours."

Jesus was learning the path that was being laid out before him, and he knew that it wasn't going to be easy, so what if he just compromised a bit? Does Jesus really need to demand God's righteousness? Does the world really need to change that much or can Jesus just step back a little and become more like the world himself?

Jesus decides that there can be no compromise, "Go away from me Satan for the scriptures say, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

In the end we learn that Jesus refuses to take matters into his own hands, even to satisfy his own needs and desires, and when he emerges from the wilderness, he is ready to begin his ministry with a clear focus on what needs to be done, but also knowing that his temptations are not behind him. They will follow him throughout his ministry. Whenever he feeds the hungry or heals the sick, he will hear the cry, "Be our king!" This is the same cry he'll hear as he enters Jerusalem in his last week. People will always ask to see miracles, which is why he must say first, "Your sins are forgiven, now stand up and walk." Pilate will offer him a way out, and so will Herod if only Jesus will show Herod a small miracle to prove who he is. And at Gethsemane, Jesus is still struggling with why it must end as it must. He pleads, "Father for you all things are possible. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want." A day later while on the cross, he'll hear, "He saved others, let him save himself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross, we'll believe in you then."

Getting back to our scripture, we know that when Jesus went into the wilderness, he was led or driven there by the Holy Spirit, but aside from the Spirit, he is alone. And forty days later, after beating his temptations, he is helped by angels, but when he emerges from the wilderness, he is once again alone. And so we have to ask ourselves, who is the source of our story? The only person it could have been: Jesus himself.

And so we realize that somewhere along the way over the next three years of his ministry, he felt the need to share his story. He felt the need to share his struggles. We don't know if it was to one individual... maybe to Peter or James or maybe Mary Magdalene. Maybe he shared it one night over dinner with all of his disciples present. We just don't know, but for some reason Jesus has let us in on his inmost spiritual battle of his heart, mind, and soul.

Maybe it is because he knew that his followers would face spiritual battles of their own. Or maybe he needs their affirmation... maybe he needs to hear them say that it will be okay. Or maybe he just wants to know that someone will be there to support him when he needs them most. But we all know the end to the story. In his hour of need, his friends will fall asleep. In his hour of need, his friends will deny knowing him. In his hour of need, he will truly feel alone crying out, "My God my God why have you forsaken me."

But even with all of this, Jesus stays true to the will of God, and so we find that in Christ we have someone in whom we can place our trust. When we need rest, when we need strength, when we are before our enemies, when we walk through the darkest

valleys, we know that we can turn to Jesus because he spent his own time in the wilderness and because we hear in his own words his inner struggle when faced with his temptations.

Most of us have heard or used the phrase, “The Devil made me do it.” Maybe we mean this literally or maybe it is just our way of saying that we gave in to our temptations... our desires. The devil tried time and time again to get Jesus to give in to his temptations, but in the end, he couldn’t do it.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is not meant to be a time of bad news before the good, but more it is a time of grace. It is a season of soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock. It is the time when even in the earliest churches people prepared for Easter by rededicating themselves to what it means to follow Christ. Christ used his forty days in the wilderness to prepare his heart, his mind, and his soul for his ministry... his ministry, which culminated in his death and resurrection and the gift of new life for us all. Had he given into temptation and saved himself, he could not have saved us.

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Let us pray. Merciful Lord, when you went into the wilderness and faced your temptations, you had a choice to make. You could either give into your desires or stay true to the will of God. In your last week, you again were faced with a choice. Save yourself or save us. We thank you that out of love, you chose us. *Amen.*