

**February 26, 2023**  
**Matthew 4:1-11**  
**“The Temptations that Define Us”**  
**Michael Stanfield**

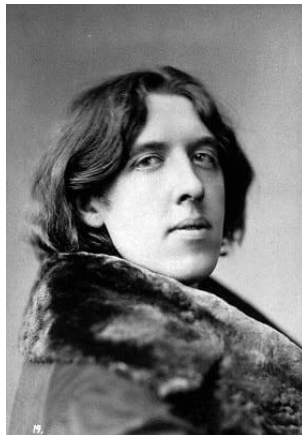
Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written,  
“One does 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 placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying 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, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do 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 splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” ’ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.



The late Mae West, famous for her lighthearted, bawdy, double entendres, was fond of saying, “I used to be Snow White — but I drifted.”



And Oscar Wilde, known for his biting wit, flamboyant dress and glittering conversational skill, was quoted more than once as saying, “I can resist anything... except temptation.”



Every year at this time – the beginning of the Lenten Season, the common lectionary invites us to revisit the “temptations” of Jesus – his time of trial before he began his ministry. It is an important event in his life– pivotal even – in shaping his identity, his ministry, and his fate.

It is important enough that an account of the temptation experience is given in all three of the synoptics – Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Temptation. We all know what that is don't we? We've eaten supper. We've had desert. An hour has gone by. We're not really hungry. But there is a new half-gallon of ice cream in the fridge. We are *tempted* to go and get a big bowl of it even though we know we shouldn't.

We run to Wal-Mart to get a new set of tires to put on the car. While we wait, we walk around the store and look. We see something we would like to have but know we don't really need and maybe can't really afford. We are *tempted* to buy it anyway.

So what is temptation? Simply the urge to do what our conscience tells us we shouldn't? Culturally, perhaps. But scripturally, it would seem, temptation means something more.

When temptation appears in scripture (Think Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the people of Israel and the Golden Calf, Sampson and Delilah, David and Bathsheba, Jonah and Nineveh,) it is really an enticement to give ultimate allegiance to anything less than God.

In our morning text, with respect to Jesus, this enticement is represented literally as the Devil (diabolos in Greek). Diabolos.



We get our English word “diabolical” from it. *Diabolos* means “accuser”, “slanderer”, “defamer”; elsewhere it can also mean “one who would condemn in order to sever a relationship.”

We all know diabolos, don't we? That inner voice that accuses us and others; that leads us to do things in the moment that we later question; that separates us from others and from God? Being tempted by the devil: diabolos. Matthew uses this mythological language as the best way to describe the reality of the breadth and depth of a kind of personal evil that created inner turmoil for Jesus of archetypal proportions.

In other words, mythological language describing the temptation of Jesus by diabolos was not some small enticement in the vein of eating extra ice cream. It was an archetypal threat to the very nature of who he was and who he was called to be – and therefore a threat to the future of humankind. It was his first and perhaps most important moment of Truth. Would he or would he not accept his destiny as the embodiment of Isaiah's suffering servant willing to endure shame and suffering and death on behalf of goodness and love?

Acceptance would change everything. Humanity would be given the blueprint for rebuilding a human life the way God intended. How Jesus handled this pivotal moment would provide a way for the rest of humanity to live accordingly.



Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr puts it this way:

“In order to live as God intended, there are three primary things that we have to let go of:

“*First* is the compulsion to be *successful*.

“*Second* is the compulsion to be *right* – even, and especially, to be theologically right. (That’s merely an ego trip, and because of this need, churches have split in half, with both parties prisoners of their own egos.)

“*Finally*, there is the compulsion to be *powerful*, to have everything under control.”

Rohr says he is convinced that these are the three “demons” Jesus faced in the wilderness and that until each of us look our own similar demons in their eyes, we should presume that they are still in charge in our lives. He says the demons have to be called by name, clearly, concretely, and practically, spelling out just how imperious, controlling, and self-righteous we all are. Richard Rohr, *Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go* (Crossroad: 2003), 42-43.



That is exactly what *Jesus* did. Every time he was tempted to be successful, or right, or powerful, he was able to see through the lie and resist and take the more risky road less traveled. And because of this he was able to accomplish what no human had ever been able to accomplish: forging an unbreakable connection for all to the source of all life: Love – something capable of overcoming all of the shame, suffering and death *this* world has to offer.

It stands to reason, then, that it might be helpful for us to study just how he did it. In so doing, we might actually discover how to become more Christ-like ourselves. So how *did* he do it?

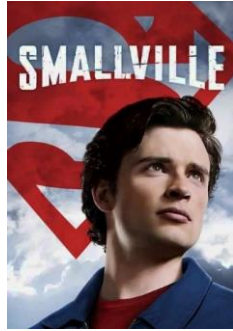
Well, I think the answer lies at the very beginning of his coming out, as it were. Just prior to his desert experience and subsequent temptations, where was Jesus and what was he doing?



He was at the Jordan River getting baptized by John. And what happens upon his baptism? God's voice booms from the heavens: "This is my beloved Son. My favor rests on him." (Matthew 3:17) Jesus was able to resist temptation because he knew first and foremost exactly who he was. If ever anyone's identity had been clear, here it was. With his baptism, he is identified (like Neo in the Matrix) as "the One," the firstborn Son of God.

Jesus overcame temptation because he knew without a shadow of a doubt *who* he was and *whose* he was.

It was *this* deeper understanding of his unique identity that equipped him for his encounter with diabolos in the desert.



I don't know how many of you used to watch Smallville. It was a show on the Fox network about superman as a teenager. It was different from any of the other superman series spin-offs and was done quite well.

It featured a 17-year-old Clark Kent who was often tempted to use his superpower for selfish gain but always managed to overcome the temptation. In fact, he, honoring his parent's wishes, decided to keep his super-power a secret from the world. And so, his super-strength was mostly understood by Clark as a terrible burden.

One particular episode demonstrated why he should keep his powers a secret and why any person with an ounce of integrity would come to understand such awesome power as just as much of a curse as a blessing.

In a freak accident, Clark and another 17-year-old are struck by lightning and Clark's power shifts completely from Clark to the other boy. At first, Clark is a bit wistful. There are drawbacks to having only ordinary human power, like the fact that it used to take him five minutes to get his chores on the farm done, and now it takes him from the time he gets home until he goes to bed.

But it is not long before Clark becomes almost elated. His ordinariness allows him to play a basketball game for the first time now because he doesn't have to worry about hurting anyone.

And until now, he has had to keep a sad distance from the love of his life. The reason is that she wears this beautiful green meteorite gem that she found, around her neck all the time, not knowing that it is Kryptonite – the only thing able to completely sap the strength from Clark. What this means is that Clark can't get near this gorgeous rose without fainting. Of course, up until the transfer of power out of him, this just makes the whole Smallville Sr. High think Clark is a nothing but a lovesick wimp.

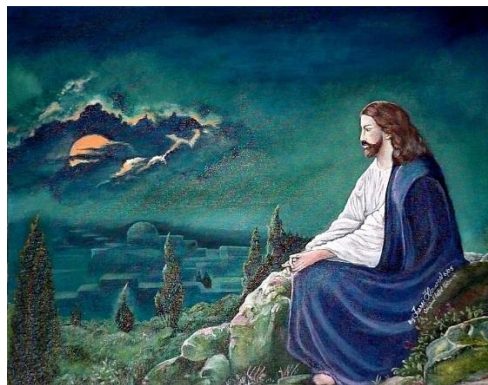
But when the power transfer occurs between he and the other boy, Kryptonite has no effect on him. He is actually able to approach her and even share a kiss.

But while Clark is basking in the peace of being rid of the terrible power and secret that has been his lot in life, the other boy is having difficulty. Slowly at first, but then completely he gives in to using his power, not to *serve* humanity, but for personal gain. He almost kills his parents and practically destroys the whole town before Clark figures out a way to transfer the power back.

And what is the difference? Why was one able to overcome temptation while the other not? Well, the answer that the writers of the show give us is that Clark Kent knows who he is – even without his superpowers – and he knows who he is because he knows just how much he is loved by his parents – powers or no powers.

On the other hand, the other boy has no idea who he is because he has parents who are completely self-serving and so he has never known any real experience of love at all.

The secret of overcoming the temptation to be *self*-serving, rather than *God*-serving, begins with the experience of God’s love and issues in developing and maintaining the habits that remind you that you are God’s and just how much you are loved. Then the only thing that makes any sense is to use your powers, your gifts, your efficacy in the service of God and others and not just yourself.



One of the habits Jesus employed to ensure this was the continual combination of prayer and meditation – activities that have a way of stripping one down to the bare essentials before God. One realizes in so doing that one is more, even, than one’s beliefs about God.



As the great Sufi Mystic Rumi put it, “Beyond ideas of right and wrong, there is a field; I will meet you there.”

He was talking about the field of God’s grace.  
Spending time in prayer and meditation where we recognize what is really going on with us.  
Allowing whatever is going on to be without judgement.  
Investigating how God might be present.  
Nurturing that presence towards a future action,

All form that path to Rumi's field where we remember again and again that we are loved so much by God that we can hardly stand it.



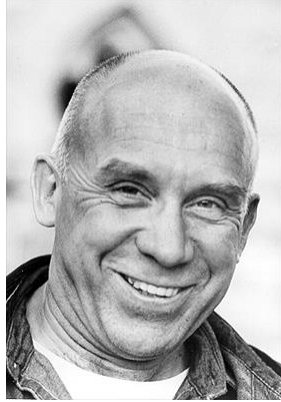
Besides prayer and meditation, the other habit Jesus developed was the reading and studying of scripture. He quoted texts from the book of Deuteronomy three times in response to the tempter. Taking the scriptures as part of the living reality of God's presence in the world has a way of changing one for the better. I am not talking about memorizing scriptures for the purpose of beating others up. I am talking about encountering the Word as living and breathing on a regular basis. Reading and reflecting on a living sacred story, works on *us*. *It* becomes alive *in* us in unseen but significant ways.



And the final, and arguably most important habit Jesus developed that prepared him for being tempted to be something he wasn't, was spending as much time as possible actively loving people – his disciples and his friends, Mary, Martha, Lazarus – but also and especially the outcasts: the Samaritans, the tax collectors and the prostitutes and his enemies – the Jewish establishment and the Roman officials.

If one only sets oneself apart to pray and reflect on the word, the value of loving real people – whether they are friends, outcasts or enemies remains little more than a quaint but untested theory. Where the rubber of faith meets the road of life is how one lives with others –especially how one treats the sometimes dark and mysterious other who is God.

Yes, the root of our temptation is the same as that of Jesus – to be something that we are not by serving something less than God – usually our fragile egos – for the sake of safety and self-justification. This Lenten Season, we are asked to contemplate the subtle and not so subtle ways we do this.



Thomas Merton, that great twentieth century mystic and contemplative put it best when he said, “Even the best of men...perhaps especially they, when they return to a frank self-awareness, confront themselves as naked, insufficient, disgruntled, malicious beings. They see their stubborn attachment to the lie in themselves; their fear of truth and of the risks it demands.”

I take this to mean that the road to Christ-like authenticity and love is found not in our culture’s established way of achieving success (working hard, going to the best college, serving in the military, becoming rich, famous and/or powerful so that our shortcomings pale in comparison to our achievements) but in our identity as children of God – in realizing how terribly petty and monstrous we can be in our search for safety and significance; and yet, in spite of that, how infinitely loved we are by a gracious God who calls us to a larger destiny.



And it helps to remember that the truth about the Christian life seems to be that no one bats a thousand in facing temptation. As a matter of fact, most of the saints felt that their averages were pretty low. We can improve our performance and thank God for that. But evidently in this life we will always have the occasional experience of succumbing to some kind of mental, physical or spiritual temptation. The sad truth is that much of the time I am too weak to resist, so that finally, with no excuses, I return to God, head bowed asking for restoration to a state of self-acceptance by God’s grace. *For it is there that I remember and experience the truth behind my existence: God’s love.*





In the end, it is not so much about resisting evil as reclaiming our birthright. When doing the right thing, the compassionate thing, the non-violent thing is connected consciously to who you are as a loved child of God, it is not a burden but a joy.

So, the question is: who are you? A child of God with a destiny? Or a fragile ego in need of a boost? How you answer that question at any moment will determine how you answer every other and in turn – how you deal with temptations of every kind.

Let us Pray. Gracious God keep us focused on who we are and whose we are by whatever means necessary: prayer, focus on your word, friendship and love, whatever it takes so that we might follow in the footsteps of your firstborn.