

God in Christ

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying 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.’” ⁷Jesus said

to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor;⁹ and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The editor of one of the journals I read offers this provocative introduction for the season of Lent: “In an age of quick fixes, fast food, instant gratification, and internet communication, the Lenten tradition seems like an ancient practice out of step with the age. Lent promises no immediate result, no instant answer, no dazzling communication from on high. Rather, Lent is a call to disciplined inquiry and patient searching after the presence of God.”¹

And I would add that Lent is a time to think deeply about the presence of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus? And how is God uniquely revealed in him? A while back, in heavy traffic, I pulled up behind a disheveled old car that wore the memory of a number of wrecks and fender benders; it also had several bumper stickers about Love and Justice, Non-Violence and Co-Existing peacefully with other faiths, and then the one that took me back, and caused me to pause and think, said: “*My Boss is a Jewish Carpenter.*”

I read it out loud to myself, “*My Boss is a Jewish Carpenter*” and I admit I found it odd in its specificity, and a weird way to sum up what we believe about Who Jesus Is. It reminded me of a conversation I had with a college student back in Columbia before we moved here. The church I served is the closest Presbyterian church to the University of South Carolina, and we were privileged to have a number of college and graduate students who made their church home among us.

¹ Keith Russell, *The Living Pulpit: Lent*, 2000, p.1.

There was one student who became very involved. He helped out with the youth group while our sons were in high school, and I grew to like him a lot. He had a great sense of humor, was very thoughtful and frankly, more committed to the church than most young adults in his stage of life. He made an appointment to see me one day, and I accurately guessed that he was thinking about going to seminary and pursuing ministry as a career.

He told me about his upbringing, having been raised in a more fundamentalist tradition, finding his home among the Presbyterians who welcomed his intellectual grappling with the things of faith, and his appreciation for our church's willingness to discuss doubts and questions. And then, this earnest young man got to his punch line for our conversation that afternoon. He said he loved the church, he found working with our youth a joy, his going on a mission trip to Guatemala with our youth had changed his life, and he was indeed thinking about going to seminary, but he had one major problem: Jesus. "I have Jewish friends," he said, "and one of the guys in our suite in the dorm is an international student who is Muslim, and I know there is just One God, so I have a really hard time with Jesus."

Most all of us can identify with that college student's honest, probing question of faith. Particularly in a time in our country and in our world, in which the need for interfaith understanding and relationship building is more important than ever. I believe it is because of Jesus that we in the Christian community must stand up and say that the desecration of 100 gravestones in a Jewish cemetery here in Philadelphia is evil. The newly rising wave of Anti-Semitism in America, with the bomb threats called into synagogues and Jewish schools and community centers must stop. And I hope every single one of you plans to be here on Tuesday night to hear Eboo Patel, an amazing faith American Muslim, who has committed his life to helping youth accept religious pluralism, while at the same time, claiming their own faith. Because that is what we have to do. We have to be clear about what it is we believe about Jesus in order to become religiously tolerant.

The most challenging aspect of the Christian faith is the tension between affirming God's love for all creation and all people *and* confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In a book about the Christian approach to religious diversity, Cynthia Campbell writes: "The fullness of Christian faith requires affirming both the universal range of God's love and the particular confession that it is through Jesus Christ that this love is fully known and experienced." To believe only in the universal range of God's love is to lose the insight and experience of God's unique revelation in Christ that makes the Christian faith distinctive. And to hold that through Jesus alone God is revealed, forecloses God's sovereign freedom to love whomever God chooses. "Only by holding the universality and particularity of Christian faith together can Christians approach an adequate understanding of how to relate to other faith traditions and to those who follow them."²

At the heart of our interfaith understanding is what we believe about the person and work of Jesus Christ and how we believe God is revealed through his life, death and resurrection. This season of Lent is the time to think deeply about the presence of God in Jesus Christ. And it begins in the wilderness, where Jesus is sent by God to prepare for his public ministry. Interestingly, the way Matthew tells it, Jesus undergoes precisely the same tests in the same sequence as ancient Israel did in the wilderness.

First, Jesus is tempted by hunger. After fasting all that time, the Tempter said, "If you are the son of God, turn these stones to bread." Remember how hungry the Israelites became out in the wilderness? They were tempted to turn away from the God, who had rescued them from slavery, until God sent them manna from heaven for food.

Jesus' second temptation is about religious power, putting God to the test. This time the Tempter tells Jesus to throw himself off the roof

² Cynthia Campbell, *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity*, p. 43 ff.

of the Temple to see if God will rescue him. Remember how Israel complained of their thirst in the wilderness and put God to the test to quench it, until Moses struck the rock with his staff and the water flowed.

Jesus' third temptation is about false worship for the purpose of worldly gain. The Tempter took him to the top of the mountain, showed him all the world saying, "Worship me and I will give it all to you."

Remember when Moses stayed up on Mount Sinai in the clouds with God for so long the people grew anxious, impatient, and made the Golden Calf? They took off their rings and all their jewelry, and melted it down and poured the gold into a mold, so that they could have a God like other gods, one they could carry around, clearly visible instead of a living God shrouded in a cloud of holiness.

Just like the Israelites, Jesus is tempted to worship a false and much smaller god. These three temptations represent basic, classic themes that continue to confront us as human beings. Through his time in the wilderness, Jesus goes where we so often go; he experiences an identity crisis – the temptation to be something other than what God intends for him to be.

As one biblical scholar puts it: "The testing of Jesus, the testing's of Israel before him, and the testing of the church today are not primarily temptations to *do* what we would really like to do, but know we should not; they are temptations to *be* someone other than who God calls us to be, to deny that we are God's children."³ As with his infant birth, this story of Jesus' temptation reveals Jesus as one of us, a human being. And in so doing it gives us an incredible and intimate access to God. That is what we say about Jesus, that in his humanity, the divinity of God is revealed, up close, in person, God with us, God for us.

³ Tom Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, p. 38.

Roberta Bondi, professor of church history at Emory, has written a little book called *Nick the Cat*, which is a delightful reflection on how a stray cat wandered into her life during a very difficult time, and how the cat became for her a sign of unexpected grace and understanding of the ways of God. She writes how Nick, “the most amazingly eccentric, lovable cat” she has ever known simply appeared in the driveway behind her house, became a member of the family for a while, and then disappeared just as quietly under a neighbor’s bush.

The subtitle of the book is *Christian Reflections on the Stranger*. This church historian uses her experience with Nick the Cat to reflect on the relationship we Christians have with the unique revelation of God – in the creation, and in the person of Jesus. She calls into question talk about spirituality – that is too often NOT grounded in our earthly humanity, suggesting that – *if* we get too comfortable with our affirmations that “God is only Spirit,” we can forget the undeniable fact that we are animals that God also made us fragile human beings to live in a material world – *and* God is revealed to us *in* this world through Jesus Christ.

In *Nick the Cat*, Bondi writes: “For Christians to act as though we are meant to be only “spiritual” is to deny the reality of what Christians have always believed about the Incarnation, namely, that when God came to reveal Godself most fully to us, God did it not through intellectual arguments, or prayer, or dreams. God came among us as a human being of flesh and blood, an animal with senses and appetites, birth, joy, suffering, and death just like the rest of us... Having seen God in Jesus Christ,” Bondi concludes, “we are once more able to value the whole of creation as an expression of God.”⁴

In the wilderness, Jesus resisted temptation, by remembering who he was, first and foremost a Child of God. In his humanity, Jesus brings

⁴ Roberta Bondi, *Nick the Cat: Christian Reflections on the Stranger*, p. 10.

God very close to us, not because God is up there, out there, somewhere, but because God is in Christ.

In him we come face to face with God, and through him we see the image and likeness of God in *every* human face – no matter the other's race, or religion. Through Jesus Christ, we affirm and live into the universal love of God for everyone, everywhere.

AMEN.