

Turn These Stones to Bread

Matthew 4:1-11

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4Then 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.'"

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

I remember seeing a bumper sticker years ago. It began with a line from the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation..." Then the next line: "I can find it all by myself."

There is temptation all around us, but I wonder if some of our daily temptations have been different during the pandemic and sheltering in place over the past 12 months

While staying at home, some are tempted stay on the couch and eat too much and binge watch movies or tv shows.

Some have been tempted to disobey the guidelines and mandates about wearing masks and staying home. Giving in can affect others.

Some are tempted to ignore how much this pandemic has hurt essential workers and people of color and people living in poverty. It has exposed inequities.

Some are tempted to make sense of the realities and chaos going on by listening to and then buying into conspiracy theories. Giving into this temptation has had grave consequences for our country and democracy.

A whole range of temptations in addition to the pre-pandemic ones.

As I was working on this sermon and service, I realized what was happening one year ago when Lent began. I had planned a series for Lent on the theme of wilderness. Little did I know what kind of wilderness we were heading toward. We had an Ash Wednesday service in the chapel. It was time for the third Sunday of Lent. Worship was planned, choirs had been practicing. And then the world changed and our lives changed and we cancelled in-person worship for March 15. The pandemic meant we were to shelter in place to slow the spread. It has almost been a year.

Where does today's story from Matthew point us as we begin the season of Lent this year?

There is something about stones and bread that catches my attention. Sometimes I have felt like I have been carrying a bag of stones this past year – weight of worry, of fear, of exhaustion, of sadness, weight of anger about racial injustice and my own blindspots & complicity, weight of seeing a rise in white supremacy groups, weight of more hate and racism and racially motivated violence. Have you been carrying some of these weighty stones in your body? mind? Heart?

Bread. What are we hungry for? Not only are we really hungry for like our favorite foods or restaurants we miss going to , but what are we hungry for on a deeper level? What was Jesus tempted to do by the devil in this story?

The story takes place right after Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River. Matthew says Jesus was led right into the wilderness in order to be tempted by the devil. Ever think of temptation as a test? That's actually the Greek word in the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught: "Lead us not into the test." Lead us not into the place where our integrity is tested, where are values are confronted, where our assumptions are challenged. God, do not leave us there.

Jesus teaches us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation," He knew what that was like and what can happen if we give in. God, do not leave us there.

Temptation is a test. In Matthew's story, the angels stay off stage. Jesus, in all his humanity, in all his divinity, is given three ominous examinations. Each one seems like the right thing to do. He is not tempted to do anything that seems wrong. No, he is tempted to do things that, on the surface, seem exactly right.

- Since you are God's Son, use your heavenly power to feed yourself and the hungry. The world has a lot of hungry people.
- Since you are God's Son, use your miraculous power to impress the crowds. The world needs something spectacular to believe.
- Since you are God's Son, hand your authority to me and I will give you everything. Skip the cross and resurrection and get it all now.

Henri Nouwen, the spiritual writer, saw what was so tempting, both for Jesus and the people who follow him. (1)

The first temptation, to turn stones into bread, is the temptation to be relevant and immediate. Jesus was physically hungry. It is to put ourselves at the center, to say, “We are the ones who can do everything that is needed.” If there are hungry people, we will feed them. If there are problems in the world, we can fix them. If there is a need, it’s up to us.

Jesus reaches back into his scriptures to declare what Moses taught: “We do not live by bread alone; we live by the words that God speaks.” Daily manna. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3. A reference to the 40 years of Israel’s wandering in the desert which echoes 40 days in the wilderness. God offers the people manna, sticky white bread-like coating enough for each day. Trust God there will be enough for today and then more tomorrow. That is a good lesson.

To push God out and make ourselves relevant and central rarely turns out well.

Jesus refuses to turn stones into bread for himself at the Devil’s behest, but later, in the very same wilderness he takes bread, gives thanks, and breaks it, and feeds five thousand with all they want, and twelve baskets full left over. This was the substantial good from God.

The second temptation is to be spectacular, to be impressive, to be so amazing that you can sway other people. “Take a swan dive from the top of the Temple,” says the Devil to Jesus. show off, in the most public places, at the most available time, and everybody will be impressed. Have to make it bigger, flashier, more impressive!

The Devil says to Jesus, “Let’s put this on TV, Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu and on FB, Instagram, Hire a great graphics team. We will hire Stephen Spielberg.” Make it spectacular!

However, God has no interest in winning people’s hearts through spectacle. Nouwen writes, “To be spectacular is so much our concern that we, who have been spectators most of our lives, can hardly conceive that what is unknown, unspectacular, and hidden can have any value.” The God we know in Christ is all of those things: largely unknown, unimpressive, and hidden. Divine Love comes to us through the invisible, the intangible and has great value.

The third temptation is the temptation to exert power. “See all those kingdoms out there?” says the Devil. “Say the word and they can be yours. To use your authority to bring everybody around you. To accomplish in one executive order all that you want to have done! The problem is that, in the process of exerting your power, you run the risk of selling out your soul. You ascend by putting others under your feet. Problem is that exerting power is not the calling for those who are baptized. Like Jesus, we are always baptized to be servants, to serve. We stand beside people, not above them.

This story of Jesus in the wilderness invites us to be honest with ourselves. As we begin this journey through Lent. Let's consider the first temptation again, what are we really hungry for? What are we going to need as we move into a new chapter of the pandemic?

We will need imagination, hope, perseverance and a sense of our connection to one another and creation and the Creator.

Can we turn rocks into hope? There was a moment on Thursday that was becoming a reality. A NASA rover streaked through the orange sky and landed on the Mars Thursday, accomplishing the riskiest step yet in an epic quest to bring back rocks that could answer whether life ever existed on Mars. Rover is named Perseverance – Percy for short. I found it thrilling to watch it land and to consider what it means.

As one PBS commentator put it, Scientists hope to answer one of the central questions of theology, philosophy and space exploration.(2) “Are we alone in this sort of vast cosmic desert, just flying through space, or is life much more common? Does it just emerge whenever and wherever the conditions are ripe?” said deputy project scientist Ken Williford. “We’re really on the verge of being able to potentially answer these enormous questions.”

We can move from cosmos and back again to our human bodies and ask - Am I hungry? If yes, what am I hungry for? Throughout his ministry Jesus is about bread.

Bread - What earthly thing could be more basic and simple? We know that Jesus fed the multitudes, we believe he's mysteriously present at this Communion table. And Jesus reminded his followers - I was hungry and you fed me.

What are our hungers? A hunger for meaning and purpose. A longing for connection, communion, intimacy, and love. A desire to know and to be known, deeply and authentically. A hunger for delight, for joy, and for creative engagement with the world in all its complexity, mystery, and beauty. And an ongoing need for healing, wholeness, and steady courage in the face of fear.

Hungry for a world where people know they are beloved by God.

Hungry for a world where children and young people are valued.

Hungry for a world where people of all races live and work together.

Hungry for a world where assault guns are not brought into schools.

Hungry for a world where people's health and well being are valued by leaders and governments.

At the end of this story, Jesus leaves the wilderness and starts his ministry. Jesus leads us to the places where human life is lived, to carry on his work of love, truth, healing, feeding and justice, for the Kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

1) <https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/2014/01/the-maybe-moment.html>

2) <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/nasas-perseverance-rover-pulls-off-tricky-landing-on-mars>