



One Page Sermon

By Pastor Robb McCoy

January 15, 2023

Worship Every Sunday at 9:30 AM

Temptation in the Wilderness

Sermon from January 15, 2023

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-17

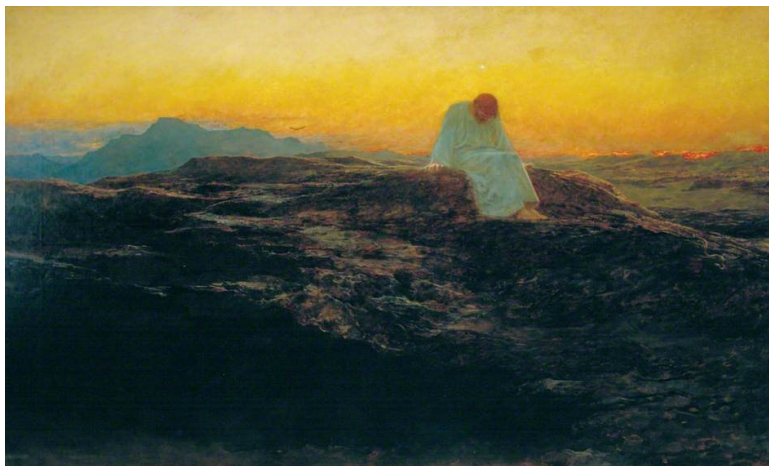
The Common English Bible makes an important change in the reading of this familiar passage. After Jesus finishes his time of fasting he comes face to face with the tempter, who asks him three questions. The NRSV and other Bible translations start the first two questions, "If you are the Son of God..." The Common English however, reads: "Since you are the Son of God..."

This may seem like a small case of semantics, but it is an important distinction, and it helps unfold one of the main themes of the Gospel of Matthew. The tempter understands that Jesus is the Son of God. This is not a test of identity. Instead, it is a test of character. The question is not if Jesus is the Son of God. The question is, what kind of Son will Jesus be?

In both Jesus' life and in at the time of writing the Gospel, there was already a Son of God. Everyone knew who what was – Augustus Caesar. Augustus was the adopted son of Julius Caesar, and after a civil war, he filled the vacuum of power that Julius Caesar's death created. Augustus stepped in as the first Roman Emperor and declared himself to be Son of Caesar, who had now ascended as a god. Son of God was a title that was already filled. Satan wanted to understand the job description.

"Since you are the Son of God," he asks, what kind of Son of God will you be?" The first two questions were about bread and spectacle. Turn stones into bread. Go to the top of the Temple and have your attendants come. Two of the most important tactics that Augustus had to rule were bread and spectacle. The Emperor controlled the daily bread (Jesus had something to say about that later in his ministry). The Emperor provided circuses – spectacle that kept people occupied. The Emperor had a plethora of attendants to care for his every whim and keep him safe. The third temptation wasn't even as subtle as these. Power; it was a simple offer, and one that Augustus, Son of Caesar, had plenty of.

Jesus however, was not going to be this kind of Son of God. He was the Son of God who shared bread and used it to build community. He was the Son of God who avoided the spectacle. He didn't go to the roof of the Temple to draw attention and show what he could



Temptation in the Wilderness, Briton Riviere, 1898
Credit: Wikimedia commons.

do. He went inside the Temple to teach and make sure it would no longer be a den of thieves. When he went up to the mountain, it was not to survey the land he would conquer, it was to tell the crowds that they were the salt of the earth. He told them to "turn the other cheek..." "Pray for your enemies..." and not to "pray like the hypocrites."

Christ refused to be the Son of God like Augustus. Instead, he would be a Son of God who was vulnerable. He would not wield power like Augustus. Instead, he would wield love offered to all.

Many churches face the same temptations Christ faced. We are tempted to hoard our bread, fear scarcity, produce spectacle to gather crowds, and cling to political power. Many churches are tempted to shy away from controversial issues to make sure that their donors are appeased, that waves are not made, and that appointments aren't disturbed. As we come out of a time of Wilderness, there are many temptations to cling to maintenance, status quo, and survival.

Jesus didn't succumb to this temptation. Instead, he risked vulnerability. He didn't allow the temptations of bread, spectacle, and power to distract him from the mission that was set before him. He was the true Son of God, one who ruled with vulnerability, love, peace, and justice. He was the true Son of God, whose Kingdom was at hand.