

*Resistance and Transformation, Part 2*

A Sermon on Matthew 4:1-11 by the Rev. Philip Major

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Each year at this time, when the Season after Epiphany is ending and the Season of Lent is beginning, we read two of the most unusual episodes in the Gospels in quick succession. The stories are the story of the Transfiguration, which we read last week, and the story of the Temptation of Jesus, which we read today. These two passages remind me of scenes you might see in a Hollywood thriller.

The lessons of these two passages lead us in nearly opposite directions, but both directions are important in our lives. Since the two lessons are nearly opposite, they have a way of complimenting and strengthening each other. So I want to encourage us to read these two stories as a pair, and to consider the themes in relationship to one another.

Last Sunday's Gospel passage was the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus took his disciples up to the top of a mountain. *And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.*

This is a story of transformation. Jesus needed to be transformed, or transfigured, by God in order to do more of God's work. We don't know exactly how Jesus needed to be transformed, but Jesus was a real human being. That means his life wasn't perfect. Jesus experienced sorrow and disappointment and rejection like you and me.

Jesus needed to lose a small piece of himself, in order to live fully as the person God knew he could be. Perhaps he needed to lose some fear, anger, or pride in order to do more of God's work. Jesus needed to be transformed by God's grace in order to live fully as the person God created him to be.

It's the same way for us. You and I need to be transformed by God's grace in order to live more fully in the love of God. You and I need to lose some part of ourselves that is keeping us from doing God's work. We need to lose some of our fear, some of our anger, some of our feelings of sorrow, or shame, or guilt in order to live in the image of the one who created us.

We need to let ourselves be changed by God's grace. This direction of letting ourselves be changed is the first of the two fundamental directions for us. The second direction is nearly opposite to the first. We need to conserve something God has given us. This is the main idea of today's Gospel passage.

The temptation of Jesus is a story about not being pushed away from what is most important in your life. The story of the temptation of Jesus is a story about resistance. The temptation of Jesus reminds us to stay rooted in the love and grace of God, and to not be deceived by false promises of power or prestige.

As Jesus' disciples we are holding onto something God has given us. We hold onto the desire to love our neighbors. We hold onto the desire to serve God by serving our neighbors. This is a conservative movement in us, as Jesus' disciples. We are conserving something that is essential for us as Christians. This is the theme of the story of the temptation of Jesus.

*Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.* Then Jesus was tempted by the devil.

Let's notice that, prior to his encounter with the devil, Jesus has made some choices that have led to his current predicament. The Spirit did not handcuff her wrist to Jesus' wrist and lead him out into the wilderness, against his will. Jesus decided to go into the wilderness. Jesus followed the Spirit into the wilderness for a reason. Perhaps Jesus understood he needed to spend some time alone in prayer and reflection, prior to beginning his ministry.

Jesus went out into the wilderness of his own free will, knowing there was no food there. The devil tempts Jesus by telling him to use the powers God has given him to achieve the quickest solution to his hunger. The devil is telling Jesus to change course.

Let's also notice the devil tries to manipulate Jesus by playing on his emotions. The devil challenges the idea that Jesus is the Son of God. "*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.*" For Jesus, being the Son of God meant healing the sick and feeding the poor. The devil is attempting to change the very definition of what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God. The devil is pushing Jesus to be more emotional and reactive. The devil is trying to get Jesus to react out of his fear, anger, or sadness.

Jesus resists the devil. Jesus refuses to be more fearful, or more angry, or to have more sorrow. Jesus has made a decision about the course he will take. He will not give in to temptation. Jesus is not going to be tempted by quick solutions that lead him away from the path he has chosen.

You and I face the same kinds of temptations in our lives. You and I are tempted to try the quick solution to the problem, rather than the strong, healthy, life-giving solution. You and I are tempted to dwell on our fears, or dwell on the injuries we have suffered, or dwell on the mistakes we have made, or dwell on things we are angry about.

You and I don't need a mythical character, like the devil, in order to come face to face with these temptations. Many of the everyday temptations we face are struggles within us.

If I have made the effort to tune into the LiveStream or managed to get yourself to St. Paul's for this worship service, you have made a decision about the path you want to follow in your life. I'm guessing you will find more good things to eat and drink at St. Paul's than Jesus did when he decided to follow the Spirit out into the wilderness. But for you and me, deciding to come to St. Paul's is like Jesus deciding to spend some time in the wilderness. We have chosen our path. We have made a decision to hear the words of scripture, to join in worship, and to be surrounded by God's people.

The path of loving and serving God's people is not an easy path. Each day we are tempted to turn aside from the way we have chosen in order to take a quicker, easier path. This temptation to give up on loving other people comes from inside us. You and I are here because we are trying to resist the fears, the anger, the shame and the sorrows that lead us away from the path of God's love.

In order to be faithful disciples, you and I take steps to protect the decisions we have made to follow Jesus' example of love. Choosing to spend your Sunday morning attending a worship service is a way of practicing resistance. For me, saying my prayers each day is a step I take to protect the decision I have made to follow Jesus.

Protect the decision you have made to follow the one we call the Lord of love. This might sound strange to you, but I protect my decision to follow Jesus by spending time in nature and eating healthy food. The things we do to protect our decisions to love God and love our neighbors are slightly different for each one of us, but the goal is the same: we are taking steps to stay strong in the love and grace of God.

Some of the threats to our decisions to be people of love, and not people of hatred, come from outside of us. We learn about these outside threats by noticing what happened in Jesus' struggle with the devil. When Jesus rejected the first temptation, the devil's words and actions became more outrageous. The devil responded by accelerating his demands and taunting Jesus. The devil took Jesus to the highest point in the Temple and told him to throw himself off the edge. When Jesus resisted, the devil responded by telling him outrageous lies.

We see people acting just like the devil in the world around us. In our nation elected officials are making preposterous claims and telling lies on a daily basis. In our nation leaders are attempting to manipulate the emotional responses of people, and using tragedies to increase feelings of anger and fear. Making bold claims, and telling lies and taking advantage of feelings of anger or fear is what the devil does in our Gospel passage. In the past year there has been a dramatic acceleration in the violence, in the lies being told, and in the disregard for the rule of law. Anyone who has ever read today's Gospel passage should know we are headed for trouble.

For the first time in our nation's history, the executive branch has deployed thousands of military troops to our cities. Roving bands of masked officers have taken more and more outrageous actions, and the people giving them directions are telling outrageous lies. These individuals are behaving like the devil in our Gospel passage.

Four years ago, on this day, Vladimir Putin's army invaded the nation of Ukraine. Mr. Putin's army has stolen more than 20,000 Ukrainian children, taken them far away from their families, and brought them to Russia. More than 15,000 Ukrainian civilians have been killed by Mr. Putin's air force. Mr. Putin's forces have bombed schools and hospitals and churches with the intention of killing Ukrainian civilians. Mr. Putin's actions and lies were outrageous from the start, and they have only become more outrageous since then. I keep on saying Mr. Putin's name, because he is the person acting like the devil. Christians should know, Mr. Putin must be resisted at every turn, not given a red-carpet welcome to a nation which used to be known as the land of the free and the home of the brave.

As Jesus' disciples, part of our work is to let God change parts of us that are keeping us from being more loving and more trustworthy. As Jesus' disciples, part of our work is to protect something that God has given us that is sacred: the desire and ability to love. God has given us the desire and the ability to love and serve our neighbors and the ability to learn and know the truth. It is our task to resist anything that threatens our ability and desire to love and serve our neighbors.

Be conservative. Follow Jesus example and practice resistance. Do not let hatred and animosity take root inside your heart. Do not be overwhelmed by feelings of anger, fear, and sorrow. Do not let those who are acting like the devil turn you away from the path of love. Keep moving forward on the path you have chosen, which is the path of truth and love. Be strengthened by the power of God's grace.