

Matthew 4:1-11

¹Then 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.

Matthew 4:1-11, 2017

There are a number of ways to look at and understand this passage, but I think an important understanding we get out of this has to do with who we understand Jesus to be.

Matthew is writing to a Jewish community who already call Jesus, Messiah, son of David, Son of God, just as we understand him to be.

In the story immediately before this one Jesus is baptized and the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove, and the voice from heaven says,

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

It is immediately after this that the Spirit takes Jesus out into the wilderness for this 40 days.

Jesus’ identity has already been established and proclaimed:

Son of the Father.

So we learn something about who Jesus is in that story which carries us into this one for today.

The Son of God is led into the wilderness to be tested. One question now is,

What difference will this identity, this relationship with the Father make in Jesus’ life?

And we find out right away.

Throughout his forty days and nights, throughout the story Jesus never gives in to the temptation to

take matters into his own hands by using his power for himself, rather than allowing the Father to provide for his every need,

to test the Father's love and care for him in this time of great vulnerability

or to be seduced by the glory and praise that comes with domination and prestige by trading in his allegiance to the Father for power,

and thereby creating his own identity

Jesus continued to be true to his relationship with the Father rather than taking control of the matters of his life, using his own power, finding his own solutions,

and in the process creating an identity that was separate from the Father.

For many these days the wilderness is a very different place from what we learn about wilderness time in this gospel lesson.

For many it is a place of recreation.

It is the place where you go hunting and fishing, where some may even play golf.

The wilderness is the place to go camping and which at least symbolizes a place to get away from it all,
a place of rest.

Some even use it as their selected place of serenity to commune with God as an alternative to church.

Not so for Jesus, there is no easy living in his wilderness, nor in most of the biblical references to wilderness times.

The wilderness is a place for lost wandering, for struggle, where one may thirst and hunger, literally or figuratively.

One may thirst and hunger for guidance, direction, wisdom, answers to everyday problems,

Or hunger and thirst for saving, truth.

Consider the time of Moses and the people wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years.

Remember the exile of the people of Israel to Babylon and all the places they were scattered to for generations.

Jesus in the wilderness confronting the devil, that is where we find him today.

This story kind of leaves us in the wilderness, except for one thing;

it brings us back to the cross.

This passage is all about Jesus and has absolutely nothing to do with you or me.

I think Matthew is trying to help us to get to know Jesus just a little bit better, and that may be his sole purpose.

There is no moral exhortation or spiritual encouragement to be found in the passage.

It is simply about Jesus, what he experienced, his story, and more importantly,

about who he is and what type of character he has.

We cannot put ourselves in Jesus' sandals here.

Jesus will not turn our stones to bread, will not prove God to us,

will not turn from the Father to embrace what we would recognize and affirm as success.

But you learn you can trust Jesus' allegiance to the Father and to you.

Here, as throughout Matthew's gospel is the process of revealing the person of Jesus.

We get to know him better.

You get to know his love for you, his care, his sacrifice, his strength and power to stand up to the devil,

and be who he came into the world to be;

The Son of God.

He is the Son of God at his baptism,

he is the Son of God in the wilderness and finally;

He is the Son of God on the cross where the devil makes his last visit to Jesus in the words spoken by the onlookers,

“If you are the Son of God, take yourself down from that cross!”

He remained faithful to his identity forged in his relationship with the Father,

and he did that for your sake, and my sake, for the sake of the world.