

Temptation!

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-6

Matthew 4:1-11

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Let's start by taking a look at the three temptations of Jesus during his time in the wilderness. Jesus has just been baptized by John the Baptist, has heard the words "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Immediately he heads out for some time alone in the wilderness to figure out what it will mean for him to live fully as the beloved son of God. The devil tempts Jesus with three things: food, physical security or invincibility, and political power. Let's unpack each of those temptations in some detail.

Food. Most of us know where our next meal is coming from, and a whole lot of meals after that. We don't have to contemplate skipping meals because the harvest failed or the money ran out. But perhaps some of us do know what that feels like. You stand in the middle of the produce section at Safeway, all these gleaming fresh fruits and vegetables, some of them organic, and you think, "I have \$10 to buy food for the week. None of this healthy beautiful food is for me. I'm going to go find the Top Ramen." That's an awful, awful feeling. You're left out of the most basic of rights, which is access to enough food. And too many people in this city, in this state, in this country, on this planet are in that place.

So the temptation of a steady food supply to one who knows food insecurity can be enormous. And Jesus, who has been fasting all this time, says, "Food for the body is important, but it doesn't take priority over God. God comes first." I once met a priest who said, "Better a hunger in the belly than a hunger in the soul." In other words, feed the

soul first. Do not let food security hold you back from committing to the work of God.

But part of the work of justice is also to feed the hungry. For those who do experience food insecurity in our midst, thank God for food stamps. Thank God for Community Lunch, which serves four meals a week to whoever walks in the door, no questions asked. Thank God for food banks. Pray that the funding for these programs never gets cut.

So Jesus resisting the temptation of food is not about starving always. We all know that Jesus loved a good meal with friends and strangers alike. It's about making sure you feed the most important part first, which is the relationship with God.

Jesus' second temptation is security or invincibility. Throw yourself off the temple—God won't let you be hurt. We see at the end of Jesus' life that in fact Jesus can be hurt and even killed. Jesus becomes vulnerable in doing God's work. Committing to God is not about committing to security. That's not an excuse.

This is a hard one for me, and maybe for you, too. I want a certain amount of security in my life. Most people do. I like steady income, a place to live that seems reasonably safe, and so on. So again, it's not that people shouldn't feel some level of security. That's a great goal for everyone. But how do we achieve it, and for whom?

Recent events have demonstrated that our government wants to make us more secure by hiring 15,000 more border and immigration staff, mostly to keep people from coming in and to kick out people who have been living here without all the privileges of citizenship. According to Nicholas Kristof,

The administration plans a \$54 billion increase in military spending, financed in part by a 37 percent cut in the budgets of the

State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

That reflects a misunderstanding about the world—that security is assured only when we’re blowing things up. [Nicholas Kristof, “Firepower is not the way out of our crises,” *Seattle Times*, March 5, 2017, A14.]

Is this the way to a more secure world? Will this bring peace and security?

I spent parts of Friday and Saturday listening to John Dominic Crossan lecture at University Congregational. Crossan talks about two ways to peace:

Conquer—victory—peace, which is the way of violence and fear. You wipe out all your enemies, and when there is no one left alive or bold enough to complain, then you have peace. That kind of peace lasts for as long as you have ammunition in your weapons. It is not God’s peace. It is not about justice or love; it is about might, about power *over* instead of power *with*.

Nonviolence—justice for all—peace, which looks like everyone having their own vine and fig tree, living in peace and unafraid. They shall not build houses and another live in them, or work in the fields and another eat the harvest, but *they* shall build houses *and* live in them, work in the fields *and* eat the harvest. Meaning there is a place for everyone to have housing, food, raise a family—a right to the basics of a good life.

Crossan says the only way you know if you have achieved peace through nonviolence is to ask the 99%, and to give them a public voice to respond.

Crossan says, “If we can’t get away from violence, we’re doomed.”

So security through violence is ephemeral. But we can take God’s path to peace as shown to us in Jesus: nonviolence, empowerment of all people, everyone has a right to food, housing, their own vine and fig

tree, the chance to live in peace and unafraid. True security comes through knowing and loving each other. It is more vulnerable, less about walls, more about bridges.

Jesus' third temptation was political power. The devil promises to give Jesus power over the world if he will just sell his soul. A small price, right? Fame, fortune, ego—all the worldly privileges and authority. And let go of that nonviolence nonsense, because you can't rule the world without a little oppression here and there. Imagine having that kind of power! You could issue an edict—or these days, an executive order or a tweet—and the whole world would snap to attention. Because what you said would carry the authority of a position of great power. People would praise you, do what you wanted them to. Think of all the good you could do in the world. And all the people you could make disappear if they didn't agree with you. Tempting, tempting.

So Jesus is wrestling with these three temptations: bodily comforts, security, and power. He wants to work for justice for all and to live into God's path of peace. He may have been thinking, ultimately, something along the lines of what Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in 1956, although of course he would not have used the word "Christian":

May I say just a word to those of you who are struggling against this evil (of injustice). Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence. If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos." [Martin Luther King, Jr., "Paul's Letter to American Christians," quoted in Bentley deBardelaben, UCC Witness for Justice article, "Let No

One Pull You So Low,” March 2017,
http://www.ucc.org/justice_advocacy_resources_witness-for-justice.]

Adam and Eve were tempted by knowledge, and they gave in. Jesus was tempted by food or physical comfort, security, and power. He resisted.

What are your temptations?

Last Wednesday we marked the beginning of Lent, where, as part of our Christian practice, we follow Jesus’ 40-day journey in the wilderness. He had to empty himself out, quiet his life, remove himself from distractions in order to focus his spirit on clarifying what it was going to mean to live as a beloved son of God. Our Ash Wednesday service did that in miniature: more like 40 minutes than 40 days. I invite you to do so as well, and to take this practice to as profound a level as you can.

Those of us who gathered on Wednesday spent some time writing or drawing about what we could let go of during Lent, and I invite all of you to think about this, too. What baggage can you let go of? What distractions can you remove so that you can be more present to God in your daily life? What space can you create for listening, for being still, for healing, for opening yourself to the Holy? What might it mean for you to live fully as a beloved son or daughter of God?

And then be open to what might grow once you have given that baggage to God or created that space in which God can work with you.

Relationship with God is all about collaboration. What corner of the realm of God is God waiting for you to help build? How will it be beautiful, nonviolent, just, peaceful, welcoming, loving, and hopeful? How will we stand as followers of a loving and nonviolent God in the face of a violent, militaristic, power-hungry, unjust world? Jesus took a deliberate time apart to gird himself for a nonviolent ministry in the face of a violent and oppressive society. We, too, are beloved sons and daughters of God. We, too, live in violent and oppressive times. We, too,

are invited to prepare ourselves spiritually to be builders of God's nonviolent, just, and peaceful realm. It will take all of us.

One way we can work toward nonviolent peace is by engaging with the White Privilege Lenten study group on Tuesday evenings starting this week. It's not easy or comfortable work, but it will really help us figure out the work of building bridges instead of walls, opportunities instead of oppression. There are many other ways to build God's realm as well, and many of you are already doing great things.

We stand at the edge of a new era. There are more refugees in the world than ever, seeking the basic elements of a good life: food, freedom from war, a place to have a home and raise a family. Are we building bridges to welcome them, or walls to reject them? Are we practicing diplomacy or wiping out desperate people? Our leaders may choose the path of violence in search of peace through military might and victory. Our God tells us there is another, more lasting, better, but riskier way. We may be tempted to use hate and violence against our fellow beloved children of God. Or we may resist temptation, tell the devil to get lost, and build God's realm of peace through nonviolence and justice.

The choice is ours. The temptations are real. Let us clarify our call in our relationship with God. And then let us move forward.

Amen.