

# Matthew 4:1-11

March 5th, 2017, Year A, 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

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A couple of weeks back, I came home from work and walked into our kitchen. My wife Bella, looked up at me as she was preparing dinner and said, *“I have a question for you.”* No *“Hello.”*, no, *“How was your day?”*, just, *“I have a question for you.”* Now, I don't know if all married men react to that kind of greeting in the same way that I tend to, but what happens to me is that a certain thought process begins to go on in my head, kind of a lot like the examination of conscience we just did at the beginning of Mass, *“What is it that I have done?”*, or much more likely, at least for me, *“What is it that I have failed to do!”* Fortunately, her question didn't have anything to do with me forgetting our anniversary, or her birthday, or her mother's birthday. Not that that has ever happened. Her question for me was, *“Why did God have to put that tree in the garden?”*

I think this is a great question; a question that is very appropriate to the readings we have just heard on this First Sunday of Lent. I also must admit, I needed to think about that question, but after a while it struck me, the answer is, the tree is there because a choice had to be made. In Chapter four of his first letter, St. John tells us simply that God is love. Our Christian theology explains this statement by telling us that God is a community of three persons; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father gives all of Himself, in love, to the Son. The Son returns this love to the Father, with all of His being. This eternal and infinite exchange of love between the two is the Holy Spirit. Three persons, who mysteriously share one divine nature. God is love. And that love is complete in its communion, having no need for anything or anyone external to it. However, and fortunately for us, that shared love is so intense and so powerful that it burst forth and overflowed into creation. Within this amazing universe created by God,

He also creates us; man, and woman. He creates us in His image which means He created us with an intellect and a will. Our intellect allows us to know, and our will allows us to choose. To paraphrase the old Baltimore Catechism, “God created us to know Him and to love Him.” God put the *“Tree of Knowledge”* in the Garden of Eden because a choice has to be made in order for the creature’s love to be real. If there is no “Tree of Knowledge” to give Adam and Eve the opportunity to choose to reject God’s love, to choose to disobey Him, then they really are not free to choose, and their love for God is not real. Love has to be freely given, not forced, not controlled, or it is simply something else.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen puts it this way, *“The only way one can ever prove love is by making an act of choice; mere words are not enough... Ice deserves no credit for being cold, nor fire for being hot; it is only those who have the possibility of choice that can be praised for their acts. It is through temptation and its strain that the depths of character are revealed.”*

Today we read the story of “The temptation of Jesus”. Let’s look and see what this story reveals to us about the depth of Jesus’ character and also what it reveals to us about the character of the one who tempts Him. We are told that it is the Holy Spirit who leads Jesus into the desert, to be tempted by the devil. This was a test Jesus had to take. Jesus prepares for this test by fasting for forty days and forty nights. And in what may be one of the greatest understatement in all the Scriptures, we are told, *“He was hungry.”* Satan sees that Jesus is physically weakened by his fast, and he attacks Jesus in His hunger, saying, *“If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread.”* There are a lot of really good commentaries on these temptations, but in my opinion, I think this is the subtlest and most effective of the three temptations. I think this was the devil’s best shot. Any regular person,

who had been fasting for a long period of time, and who somehow had the power to change stones into bread, would have rationalized this whole thing away saying, “*What is the big deal?*” and, “Who will get hurt?”, or better still, “*I am really hungry, and besides, who would ever know?*”. The temptation is multi-faceted. The devil tempts Jesus not just to satisfy His hunger by breaking His fast; he also tempts Jesus to the sin of pride by tempting Him to use His power for His own selfish needs, both to satisfy His hunger and to show this devil who He really is.

All Satan needed to do was to get Jesus to change one of those rocks into a piece of bread and he would have won. Getting Jesus to use his power for His own selfish needs would have been an act of disobedience to His Father, who had sent Him on a mission to show the world what real, self-sacrificial love is. Instead of caving into pride and selfishness, Jesus leans into God’s Word for His strength, telling the devil, “*One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.*”

Jesus resists the temptation by responding with a quotation from the Book of Deuteronomy (Dt 8:3), which hearkens back to the Israelite's disobedience and rebellion in their forty-year desert wanderings, where they complained about not having enough food. Jesus is saying there is more to life than bread, that being obedient to God, listening, hearing, and obeying His word is much more important.

The second temptation is less subtle than the first. I think the devil was shook that his first attempt didn't work. It had always worked before. Since Jesus defended Himself so well with the Word of God, the Tempter decides he will use it against Jesus. He once again dares Jesus to prove His divine Sonship by throwing himself off the temple parapet, trusting that God will save Him. Once again there is the temptation to pride. A temptation to prove who He is to

the devil, and to everyone else who would see this spectacular display of power. Added to pride is again disobedience to the Father's will. This ostentatious display of power would be a way to short circuit His mission. People would believe in Him, not by coming to believe in Him through His example and teaching, but instead they would believe based on His power. There would be no need for them to change their hearts, no need for conversion, no free will choice made to give up everything, and go and follow Him.

Jesus again goes back to the book of Deuteronomy (Dt: 6:16) to answer the devil's demand. The passage refers to an incident in Exodus (Ex 17:1-7) where the Israelites did demand the Lord to prove Himself by providing water for them to drink. Where the Israelites failed to trust in the Father during their desert wanderings, Jesus refuses to do the same. Jesus passes the second test.

Again, it seems to me, the devil is growing in his desperation. He has run into something he has never seen before, someone, who refuses to give in to pride. In this third temptation, the devil offers everything he has, all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence. Now that is something very interesting to ponder, that all the kingdoms of the world are under Satan's power, but in the sense that all people have given in to sin, it is kind of hard to argue with him. Is this a real temptation for Jesus? I believe, yes, it is. Maybe not in the sense that Jesus wanted to have all the kingdoms of the world under His control, for His own gain. But, Jesus did come to bring all the kingdoms of the world under His influence. That is His mission. He came to turn men's hearts away from the selfishness of sin and back to the self-giving love of the Kingdom of God. The third temptation is that Jesus could fulfill His mission without having to go to the Cross. Jesus rejects the devil's offer to worship him, once again quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy.

The Gospel today shows us the Lordship of Jesus. Where both Adam and Israel failed in their temptations. Jesus passes the test. Jesus chooses to serve His Father in obedience to His mission. Jesus is able to resist the devil's temptation, because he refuses to allow anything – even all the power of Hell – to damage His relationship with His Father. Jesus' power to resist the temptations of the devil doesn't come from His superhuman will of iron. Jesus' power to resist temptation comes from His infinitely deep love for His Father.

The Church gives us this Lenten Season as an invitation to enter into Jesus' wilderness journey. If we dare to take up that invitation, we should be prepared to be tested, and we should be prepared to choose. We should be aware that we have an enemy, who desperately wants to keep us from growing closer to God. We should also know this enemy will tempt us in whatever personal weakness we have, and who will especially tempt us in our pride, that place where we are most easily deceived.

We should also be aware that we do not have to be alone in our desert wanderings. We have a Lord who understands human temptation and weakness, because He lived it. We have a Lord who wants to empower us to overcome those temptations, through the power of His love, if we only turn to Him in our need. And, most importantly, we have a Lord, who, through that same power of love, desperately wants to forgive us, and pick us up again, when we fall, if only we turn to Him in our need. We all will have our own choice to make. May these forty days be a time of preparation and spiritual growth for each of us.