

As the Ruin Falls
Reading from the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 8:2-6
Reading from the New Testament: Matthew 4:1-11

I have to be honest. I struggle with this text. I mean, I understand the important themes that Matthew is seeking to convey here. I can follow the way the Gospel parallels Jesus' wilderness temptation with Israel's sojourn in the Sinai Peninsula. I can connect the dots between settings, events, and even numbers. Yet, each time I come upon this text, I find myself filled not with wonder but weariness.

Granted, one cannot read today's Scripture without being impressed by Jesus' obedience, strength, fortitude, and resolve, not to mention his capacity to quote scripture from memory after fasting for forty days. Most folks would be hallucinating at that point, unable to recall their name. Personally, if I start feeling a bit peckish, I'm running across the street for a Payday or a Snickers before I can compose a coherent sentence.

And maybe, just maybe, that is the problem I have with this story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, particularly if what I'm supposed to get from the text is the challenge to do likewise. I mean,

come on! It's Jesus, you know, Son of God, Savior, Redeemer. How are you going to compete with that?

“Then 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.” So, I'm sunk before I even get to the starting line. I don't care if you are taking the test to qualify for the Navy Seals or the exam to pass Spanish 1, you are always counseled to get a good night's rest and eat a healthy breakfast. But here it sounds like the preparation instructions say: Do not eat for forty days before arrival. Then, on test day you will be asked to take the SAT while running a marathon in 115-degree heat and rejecting offers for an air-conditioned limousine, the palace at Versailles, endorsement contracts from Nike and Under Armour, and a winning lottery ticket.

Are you kidding? After a forty day fast, they might have signed me with a sub from JimmyJohns. And yet, with stoic resolve Jesus demurs, *Thank you, no. I'll pass.* If this is one of those *go and do likewise* things, our prospects are looking pretty dim.

Watching Jesus breeze through these temptations is like coming across one of those *Facebook* videos that expose how truly unskilled you are. Have you seen these? Barefoot dude in the wilderness builds a three-bedroom split-level with a garden spade and a jackknife ... in like, 3-minutes; or how to create a gorgeous rose bouquet out of carrots and radishes during the commercial break before *Final Jeopardy*.

Impressive? Absolutely. Possible for the mere mortal, much less the middling preacher? Not bloody likely. Oh, I've seen any number of folks make a fine attempt to battle temptation, even come close to the target, but fear or pride or insecurity or hunger breach, like the drop of coffee on the fine linen paper of an eloquently written thank you note before it's mailed, leaving the hint of imperfection even on the righteous.

So, what to do with the vexing challenge to be ***Jesus Strong*** in the face of temptation? Hey, I read the occasional theological periodical and there's always Google, so I should be up to the task of mining the meaning of Matthew's missive here. Without too much digging I found a reputable magazine article focusing on Jesus' temptation. "Now, we're getting somewhere," he thought. Unfortunately, a cold chill travelled up

my spine as the author framed Jesus' temptation in the language of some kind of contemporary business management theory.

I'm sure the author is knowledgeable, with only the best intentions, and her thoughts provided food for many a preacher this week, but it sort of gave me the heebie-jeebies. She was merging Jesus' temptation narrative with something called the skill/will matrix, as defined by Hersey and Blanchard in their work on situational leadership ... I'm sorry, but I'm out. She lost me right there. My apologies to all our management and corporate folks for whom this stuff is bread and butter. Even I could tell there are some useful personnel tools here – that will can overcome some lack of skill, but all the skills in the world won't overcome the lack of will. I even liked the way she described the need to fire someone as granting them “freedom counseling.” Yet, bottom line, the business lingo wasn't energizing my inner Stephen Covey.

You see, I once understood that my purpose in life was to get a job. My hands weren't steady enough for surgery. I wasn't a math wiz, so engineering and rocket science were out. Therefore, I went to college and majored in business ... and I was miserable; made even more

miserable by the sight of my classmates finding their *jam* in accounting and arbitrage, logistics and labor law. They'd get fired all fired up talking about *accelerated depreciation* or *debenture bonds*, and as my eyes glazed over, I went in search of a pillow and a couch, because the BSBA degree track just wasn't going to spark anything in me but the desire for a nap. Miserable.

To this day, I hear or read some boiler plate, hot new business theory, and I quickly remember the misery. The problem wasn't the value of the education; rather, the problem was that I had conflated want and purpose, sustainability and meaning, consumerism and conscience, lifestyle and calling. Yes, I would need a job, but to what in life was I truly being called with purpose.

So, this scholar's take on Jesus' temptation left me cold, but it did provide me the memories of my Mizzou misadventures in Middlebush Hall, home of the business school, which in turn brought to mind a long ago moment of discovery, that believe it or not, returns me to the text today.

In a perpetual funk, I sought refuge from debt-service coverage ratios. My roommate had a nice stereo, the kind you acquired in an actual audio store as opposed to the Wal Mart special in my possession, and with it, he had high-fidelity, noise canceling headphones, the sort that can whisk you away on the wings of a song. I put on an old Phil Keaggy album and kicked back, so I could brood and feel sorry for myself and get lost in some masterful guitar chops.

I guess the Spirit had a different agenda, though. You see, the song that came on was based on an old C.S. Lewis poem, titled, *As The Ruin Falls*, and it was as though God jerked me aside by the collar to give me a good tongue lashing, an actual *come to Jesus* meeting.

All this is flashy rhetoric about loving you.

I never had a selfless thought since I was born.

I am mercenary and self-seeking through and through:

I want God, you, all friends, merely to serve my turn.

Peace, re-assurance, pleasure, are the goals I seek,

I cannot crawl one inch outside my proper skin:

I talk of love --a scholar's parrot may talk Greek--

But, self-imprisoned, always end where I begin.

Ouch! Again, I say, ouch! Never in my life had I been spoken to so directly and with such truth. Not just a word or a phrase or a couplet, but two whole stanzas exposing me to me. My self-involvement, greed, insecurity, and angst all wrapped up in the words of a dead poet. And where had all my plans, efforts, intentions, and motivations landed me? On the cheap carpet of a college apartment, wishing I was just about anywhere else on the face of the earth.

So, what does this have to do with Jesus' temptation in the wilderness? Listen to this third stanza of Lewis' poem:

Only that now you have taught me (but how late) my lack.

I see the chasm. And everything you are was making

My heart into a bridge by which I might get back

From exile and grow [up]. (C.S. Lewis, *As the Ruin Falls*)

And everything you are was making my heart into a bridge by which I might get back from exile and grow [up]. In the wilderness, famished after forty days without so much as a pack of m&m's, for that matter, not even an m, Jesus is offered a whole buffet of opportunities, like one of those glossy college brochures promising unlimited dining options, the fulfillment of career dreams you haven't yet imagined, the

achievement of all the respect, open doors, and approbation that come with a degree from that venerable institution, all of it for only \$70,000 a year, each room coming with its own Peloton and xBox. When I was touring with my children, a couple of colleges had me at hello. Forget the boys, sign me up!

Take it, Jesus ... Every material craving, all authority and power, and still only one boss. It's all yours ... for a price: your soul, your spirit, your integrity, your relationships, your God. How about it? From infancy the message is reinforced to us that the offer put before Jesus is the objective of life, and yet, how many lives have been broken by it? Jesus refuses the offer and later he will reveal that the offer is empty anyway: "What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"

In the wilderness, we see the classic conflict between a world with self at the center and a kingdom with God at the center. One offers a false promise of fulfillment, the other offers life with meaning. One is a path that leads to increasing isolation and loneliness, resentment and suspicion, the other opens the way to relationship and community and

trust and purpose. The Gospel, the good news is that in Jesus, God accomplishes for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves.

“I am mercenary and self-seeking through and through: I want God, you, all friends, merely to serve my turn. Peace, re-assurance, pleasure, are the goals I seek, I cannot crawl one inch outside my proper skin...” C.S. Lewis evokes the inevitable consequence of the self-centered existence. Yet, even there in the felled ruins of our false dreams and schemes, there is hope. “And everything you are was making my heart into a bridge by which I might get back from exile.”

What we see in Jesus’ reactions to the three temptations, are not the prerequisites for God’s approval. Rather, what is revealed is the bridge Christ builds to welcome us back from exile and grow [up].
Amen.