

March 26, 2006

Time of Testing
Matthew 4:1-11
Luke 4:1-13

The appearance of John the Baptist was a call to Jesus to begin his ministry. At his baptism God's ordaining had been laid on Jesus. Now he had to formulate the plan for his mission. How was he to get his message across to the people he came to save?

Could he bribe them by satisfying their creature comforts?
Could he thrill them with feats of magic and entertainment?
Could he compromise with the evil that surrounded them? He had to have time to think things out. A time alone away from family and friends, away from the carpenter shop, away from the demands of everyday life.

He took off for the Wilderness. Even today the area of Palestine that stretches from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea is an area of sand, crumbling limestone, flint, crags and precipices. It is a place deserving of the name given it by the ancient Jews,

“The Devastation.” Move a few yards off the highway and you’re alone in a rocky arid wilderness.

Both Matthew and Luke tell us of Jesus’ experience in this lonely land. They had to have learned of what happened through Jesus for he was the only one who could have known about this opening event in his ministry. Right now is a good opportunity to read about this experience in the early verses of the 4th Chapter of Matthew’s Gospel.

- 1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.***
- 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.***
- 3 The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”***
- 4 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”***
- 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.***
- 6 “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’***
- 7 Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’***
- 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.***

9 “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

10 *Jesus said to him*, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

11 *Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

The painted pictures that we have seen portraying this event take Matthew literally. Those pictures show the Devil with his forked tail and his horns talking to Jesus. I don't buy that. I think what we read is an account of what went on in the mind of Jesus as in the solitude of the time the inner man fought through to reach the determination of how and what he had been ordained to do. This is the experience we all face when we come to that fork in the road. The road suggested by the Devil is presented to us as wide and easy. The road to eternity is presented to us as a winding road to the hill country, long and hard.

It is right here that I have a problem. If Jesus was all man and all God it would seem that he would know what he was to do and the right way to do it without an inner conflict. But this

is my problem. Matthew seems to solve it by portraying the Devil as the tester. And I think tester rather than temptations is the correct word. And I suggest that this experience to one extent to another is something we all go through.

The first question that comes to the mind of Jesus, to the inner man, is one of doubt, *“Are you the Son of God?”*

This is not unlike the question of doubt we raise from time to time. I know there is a God, how else would I be at this place at this time? But there are times when I question whether or not God knows me or really cares about me. I read the Bible and attempt to study its contents and behind it all is the nagging question, *“Is it really God’s Word?” “Does God have a will for my life?” “Is Jesus really the Son of God or just a super prophet, an extraordinary man?”*

Nagging questions of doubt, but question never the less. And here we find Jesus in his solitude expressing a doubt, *“If you are the Son of God?”* We read a note of doubt, of disbelief in those words. Jesus faced his doubts honestly and so should

we. We are called upon to go as far as faith will take us with an open mind. Doubt and an open mind can as easily lead us to conviction as to disaster.

In his book, *“Chronicles of Wasted Time”* an English journalist wrote, *“Only atheists never doubt; the moment one believes one automatically doubts, doubt being an integral part of faith. After all, we can only hope to see the images of truth, not truth itself.”*

Horace Bushnell was a great 19th Century preacher in the Congregational Church. Some called him, *“The Prince of the Pulpit.”* As a young student he wrote his parents, *“I have reached the place where I cannot affirm belief in any Christian precept. I can but cling to the principle I believe it is right to do right and it is wrong to do wrong. I have been praying to that abstract principle, even though it is a dark prayer.”*

Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the great preachers of the last century, wrote his mother while he was away at college,

“I have made a decision to sweep God out of the Universe. I start again taking nothing for granted.”

George Matheson, a product of the 1800s wrote the familiar hymn that goes in part:

***Oh love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be...***

As a student the writer of these words wrote his preacher asking that his name be stricken from the membership as he could no longer say that he even believed in God.

Doubt was not unknown to those who are written up or who wrote the Bible. They tell me that nearly one third of the Psalms are psalms of doubt. Abraham, the Father of three great religions, questioned if God was really with them during that long, long period that preceded the birth of his son Isaac. Jeremiah, who we studied a few weeks ago, suffered a period in his life when he felt that God had abandoned him. And Job, poor old Job, in his suffering had question after question. John

the Baptist, who came as the forerunner of Christ, while in prison sent some of his followers to Jesus with the question, ***“Are you who is to come, or shall we look for another?”*** And now Jesus, as he faces the time of testing, must first overcome the doubt, ***“If you are the Son of God?”*** Honest doubt often leads to stronger conviction.

What do we do to overcome our doubts? That inner Jesus when faced with doubt, reminded himself that man is to live by the words that proceed from the mouth of God.

Arthur Gordan quotes his wise and experienced friend Dr. Samuel Shoemaker as saying that we can face doubt by opening our minds and lives to the ***“stream of God’s power.”*** The power to become. To do this we are to ***“act as if.”*** ***“Act as if the whole thing, the Gospels, the Good News, the reality and love of God as revealed by Christ is all true.”*** Never mind the doubts, behave as if you believe. Dr. Sam opines that if we will try the way of believing we will ***“find ourselves being swept along by a current not of our own making.”***

Jesus came into a world waiting for a messiah who would come as a liberator of the Jewish people. He would conquer Rome and become a victorious overlord of all the world. Jesus was faced with the choice of fitting himself into this popular belief or developing a pattern that was his own. Here was a struggle that took place in the mind of the inner Jesus, the agony of choice and decision.

The choices outlined in Matthew's account of this struggle appear to be attractive. In his choice of plan rests the faith of God's plan of salvation.

Turn stones into bread, and what is so bad about that? In Exodus we read where God told the Jews who wandered through the Wilderness, "*I will rain bread from Heaven for you.*" Our political campaigns are largely based on promises of material benefits. The promises are basically bribes, bribes for votes. Stones to bread, a bribe to satisfy man's dream of prosperity. This is a dream or desire that is alive today. It is often used by certain of our religious community to raise

money. *“If you will give to the church generously it will be given back to you, generously.”*

This last week we received a mail-out from St. Matthew’s Church. I have forgotten where they are located. Anyway, they sent us a piece of paper with a picture of Jesus on it with his eyes closed. The gimmick to get your attention was to stare at those eyes and they would open and derved if they didn’t. It got my attention.

The instructions said that this paper imprinted with the picture of Jesus was a prayer rug. I was to take it that night into a quiet room with the door shut. I was to kneel on it and pray for what I wanted God to do for me. I was to then place the prayer rug in the Bible for the night. First thing the next morning I was to return the prayer rug in an envelope furnished by St. Matthews so that they could send it to somebody else. In capital letters I was informed that it was very important that I send a preprinted prayer request with the rug. In that prayer request I was to check off my request. They listed a number of

things which included health, my children, a better job, a house, a new car, and of course, money. There was also an opportunity to send a little *“seed money for God’s work.”* With this rug was the usual testimonies i.e., my pain is gone; God blessed us with \$10,700 and we went out and bought a new car and so forth.

Turn these stones into bread, *“The temptation to use God’s power selfishly.”* St. Matthews Church calls on me to seek God’s power in a selfish way so that they can raise some money. Out of Jesus’ inner fight in the Wilderness comes the answer that we are to live our life following God’s commandments and God’s will, not ours.

If Jesus had tried to win mankind to his way by furnishing them with creature comforts how long would it have lasted? I suspect until someone got the idea that the other fellow was getting more than he was getting or that God could give more than he was giving.

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Pastor's Message

The inhabitants of the ancient city of Shechem believed that at the quietest moments of the night they could hear music made by running streams deep beneath the city's foundations. Sophocles, listening to the ebbing tide of the Aegean Sea retreating on "the breath of the night wind," heard in its rhythmic sighs the "eternal note of sadness" which is in all human hearts.

There are deep and abiding melodies all around us to soften, strengthen and inspire us if we will but take time to be quiet and listen for them.

Human wickedness and perversity create such a din in our ears that we are inclined to conclude that the whole human family is past redemption. But, beneath the clamorous dissonance of human perversity there is the quiet music made by multitudes of heroic hearts. All around us are heroic people who patiently carry their crosses, uncomplainingly bear their pains and sorrows and courageously perform their duties. The spectacular clamor of evil men should never overwhelm us to the extent that we fail to hear the music of heroism that still is made by human hearts.

Above the anarchy, conflict and chaos of human affairs there is the quiet music of order and regularity which finally governs the universe and men. Nations and men do not break God's and nature's laws; they only seem to. They really break themselves over the broken ruins of the vastest monuments to human wilfulness, error, and wickedness; the quiet but invincible music of God's law and nature's regularity triumphs.

Amidst the storms of doubts, confusions, disillusionings and disappointments which come upon us comes the compulsive music from the world of the spirit which calls us to hope, to courage and to good will. We can hear it in the worst storms which break upon us if we will be quiet and listen.

PRAYER

In all the woes, conflicts and confusions which may break about me, help me, O God, to hear the music which comes from the depths of reality that my spirit may be renewed in gentleness and restored in courage. Amen.