

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Not What We Wanted, Not What We Expected”

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Matthew 4:1-11

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. *2* He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. *3* The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ *4* But he answered, ‘It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, *6* saying 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.”’

7 Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is 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* and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ *10* Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.”’

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

My daughter Maren was in New York City this past week as part of the Senior Showcase for Theatre majors from Ball State University. She was one of only seven students chosen so it was an honor just to be there and to perform for agents, casting directors and others in the theatre industry. Following the Showcase performance, the agents and casting directors leave their business cards for the student with whom they were particularly impressed. The next day they interview these students to explore possible future representation or recommendation.

The Showcase took place on Monday night. I thought about and prayed for and worried about Maren all day. It was the night she had been waiting for since she enrolled in college nearly four years ago. In many ways it was the night of her dreams. My cell phone rang about 9:00 p.m. It was Maren’s boyfriend informing me that the Showcase was over and that it went “O.K.” When I asked where Maren was her boyfriend told me, “She’s in the bathroom.” It was then I knew that the Showcase had not gone well. A few minutes later I called Maren. She was in tears. She had performed well she thought. She had done her best. Several of the students had received cards from agents and casting directors. She had received none. Not a single one was interested. She was hurt. She was embarrassed. She was suddenly very scared about what to do next. What do you do when your night of dreams turns into a nightmare?

As a father, I hurt for her and with her. As a father I have been trained to step in and do whatever I can to make things better for my girls. I wanted to call those agents on the phone and tell them a thing or two about my wonderfully talented daughter. I wanted to set up a

second chance Showcase so she could perform again, this time in front of people who might appreciate her talents. I wanted to tell her that I was certain better opportunities would be coming tomorrow or maybe the day after. But as much as I wanted, I couldn't change what had happened. I couldn't even make a meaningful promise that things will be better. I was helpless. As I thought about it, I wanted to be for her like most of us want God to be for all God's children. I wanted to give her a simple and certain solution. I wanted to be large and powerful and in control. I wanted to keep her in an Eden where everything goes nicely and as planned. But if I was ever that kind of figure, I am not anymore. I certainly wasn't Monday night.

In the gospels, following his baptism, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. In particular, Matthew account of Jesus encounter with Satan portrays not so much a lesson on human temptation but more of one about Jesus' identity. Who is Jesus? Who is it that God has sent Jesus to be?

Satan tempts Jesus to turn stones to bread. Bread stands for all of the material things we need in life. What is more basic to life than the need for food? But Jesus said that man does not live by bread alone. Jesus is to be about more than meeting our human physical needs.

Satan tempts Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the temple without so much as skinning a knee. Wouldn't it be nice to have a God who performs spectacular spiritual feats to help us in our times of unbelief? It would certainly make the life of faith much easier. But Jesus refuses saying that God should not be put to such silly human assessment tests.

Satan then tempts Jesus with political power, complete authority over all of the kingdoms upon the earth. Certainly Jesus would be a much more attractive choice than our present politicians and world leaders! Wouldn't it be wonderful if Jesus were in charge of our protection and our ultimate security? But Jesus refuses saying that he is not about to be a political leader.

Who is this Jesus? The temptation story tries to answer that question. Jesus isn't the face of God we want or perhaps expect. We would like a God who meets all of our needs, who is complete control over the things of life that bring us pain and cause us disappointment, who fixes things quickly and easily, and a God who keeps the world in good order, at least according to our standards. We want a black and white God, one easy to understand, one easier to believe, one still easier to control for our own human purposes. We'd like a God who protects us as children in a pain-free perfect garden.

But this kind of God was not present in the person of Jesus the Christ. Perhaps that is why he was betrayed and denied and crucified. Jesus was so disappointing. He didn't simplify God to a distant mighty power that would control life, make sense of all things, and always make us happy. Instead he lived out the presence of a God who was there to experience the pain and joy, mystery and certainties of life. This was a God who chose to become weak like us. This was a God who chose to be powerless as we seem to be. This was a God who became small as we sometimes feel.

Jesus was tempted to be the God we wanted and the God we expected. It would have been so simple. But he rejected those temptations to instead be the presence of God in the midst of life's circumstances, and to offer us a clear way to redeem life even through failure and pain and death. We may not fully understand this God. We may in fact at times be challenged by this presence. But in the person of Jesus Christ, we know that God has chosen to be present for all of our life's adventures.