

A Few Words About the Word  
Matthew 4:1-11  
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The last couple of weeks have been pretty heavy at ECF, I'll admit, and I don't mean the stones. I mean that we've waded through some pretty heavy and deep Old Testament material in search of some Lenten enlightenment about remembering all our God has done for us. Just to review for a moment. On our first Sunday of Lent, we took a look at the famous Ebenezer stone the prophet Samuel erected in honor of God's help in the Israelites' military victory over their archenemies the Philistines, after they had sought the Lord's favor through prayer and fasting, which of course was necessary since the Lord had fallen out of their favor for many years. The word, Ebenezer, means, of course, "stone of help," because Samuel realized that "Thus far, the Lord has helped us." On the second Sunday of Lent, we visited that scene in the Gospel of John wherein a woman accused of adultery was about to be stoned to death until Jesus wrote something in the sand at the feet of her accusers and suggested to them that "He who is without sin should cast the first stone," which left the woman alive and standing alone with Jesus who sent her on her way with the admonition to "go and sin no more." Last week, we reviewed the episode of Moses' frustration with the Israelites for grumbling to him about the lack of water in the wilderness following their Exodus from Egypt, and God's mercy and provision of water from a stone, despite their

questioning, “Is the Lord among us or not?” It turns out that God isn’t really bothered by that question, and calls us forward in faith even when we are tempted to ask it. Which brings us to tonight’s familiar passage from Matthew about Jesus’ own temptation to ask that question as he gets hungrier and hungrier during his forty days and forty nights in the desert, and then finds himself on the receiving end of some challenges the Tempter presents him. Yes, the material and its presentation has been pretty heavy so far this Lent, so this Sunday, I want to lighten the load on your ears and brains as we remember the role the Word of God has played in our lives.

If tonight’s story teaches us anything, it is that you do not want to sit down at a poker table with Jesus, because he will always call your bet, and raise it too. And he never bluffs. Yes, our scene in the desert between Jesus and the Tempter, is a little like a game of high stakes poker to see who will take home the prize of Jesus’ messiahship, his saviorhood, if you will. You see, Jesus’ has just been baptized and proclaimed by God with those wonderful words, “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased” when he is led, we are told, led out by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. Now right there, even at the very beginning of the story, we may be feeling uncomfortable with the notion of God leading us into temptation, especially after we’ve just prayed in the Lord’s prayer for God not to do that to us. But fear not, the word translated here as “tempted” can be translated in several different ways, and the most useful way is “tested” rather than tempted,

that is, “put to the test” to see how he will respond to that affirmation of being God’s son, rather than tempted to see whether he will stumble or fail in the sense that we may stumble or fail when faced with the choice to sin or not. The devil is not holding out a joint for a teenaged Jesus to smoke on a street corner. He is seeing if Jesus will take full advantage of the power he has been given for his own good, rather than for the good of the Kingdom of God. Will Jesus live into the role of Savior of the world from God’s perspective, or from our perspective? You see, all the things that the devil dangles in front of Jesus are good things, beneficial things – bread to feed a hungry world, the chance to prove that God’s word is true and reliable, a government of justice and righteousness. Yes, if Jesus is truly the Son of God, then these things in his hands would surely mean good things for the world, no hunger, authentic religion, government without corruption. But it would also mean a world without grace, and therein lies the temptation if there is one in this story.

But back to the poker table. So, God’s grace is on the line in the form of Jesus’ call to be God’s messiah, faithful to God’s mission rather than our desires for a perfect world. And the devil is the dealer. And every time the devil makes a bet, throwing down the chips that look like salvation, Jesus calls the bet, and raises the ante, and the pot gets too rich for the devil’s blood, and he folds his hand and deals again. Jesus never really has to show his cards, he never really has to perform a miracle to rebuke the devil, to win the game. He simply quotes from the Word of

God, and takes away all the chips. Yes, if there is a message in tonight's text, it is that you can't outbluff God. Well, that, and that the Word of God is a pretty powerful thing that you might want to be familiar with just in case you find yourself sitting down with the devil to a nice game of poker to see how faithful you will be to God's call to be bearers of God's grace to the world, to see whether you will take full advantage of the power you have been given for your own good, or even the good of the world, rather than for the good of the Kingdom of God. You see, if there is thread which ties together the Biblical passages we have been looking at over the past several weeks, besides the stones in the stories, it is that the Word of God is a reliable "way" of living in God's grace, and whether that is the word of God in written form on the tablets of the Ten Commandments, or the word of God in the form of God's promises uttered from Moses' mouth, that word is sufficient to keep us on that narrow path of God's grace. You see, the Israelites in Samuel's day forgot about the Ark of the Covenant. The Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day forgot that there were more commandments than the ones which were useful for their own purposes. The Israelites in Moses' day forgot that God had just spoken a word of freedom and provision that opened the red sea and provided manna and quail. Every time we forget what God has to say, we'll find ourselves tempted to use the power God has given us for our own ends, rather than God's ends.

And so it behooves us to hold on to God's word, to make it our own, to use it to remember God's promises of grace. Tonight, in a little while, we'll hear some of the ways God's word can minister to us in times of need, and you'll hear some of your brothers and sisters testify to how that has happened in their own lives. And hopefully that will provoke in you the memory of those passages of Scripture which form the bedrock of your faith, and inform your mind and heart about God's grace. And if that doesn't happen, maybe that's a sign that you are not quite ready to play poker with the devil and that you'd better get back to reading the Bible a little more often.

But let me get the ball rolling and share with you a few of the passages of Scripture that have meant something to me over the years. I admit that I am not big on Scripture memorization, partly because I don't have a particularly good memory, but also because I tend to focus on the whole story rather than its parts. That is not to say that I haven't memorized certain passages of Scripture, but rather that the reason I have isn't because I tried to, but because certain passages have stuck with me, and that I have wrestled with, and returned to them, often enough over the years that they are now indelible etched into my heart and mind. And so here are a few of them.

The first one that comes to mind comes from Hebrews 13:5: "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'" When I first read this passage as a

teenager, I think I had just finished reconciling my bank account and was feeling pretty unreconciled about my financial future. My family was by no means impoverished, but there weren't many luxuries either, and the enormous house next door, equipped with its own tennis court that I could see enviously from my bedroom window, didn't help me to feel very content with what I had, or was likely to have. And so I had developed an obsession, thankfully short-lived, but an obsession with making a lot of money, or at least treating with respect the money that I did have. And so I would come home from collecting from the customers on my newspaper delivery route, and get out the iron and straighten out all the dollar bills I had wrinkled by stuffing them into my pockets along the way. But when I read this passage, it really made an impact on me, and I began to see that for all the money the guy next door had, I couldn't see that he had the experience of either contentment, nor the confidence that God would never leave him nor forsake him. And so I began to put things into perspective, and to this day, every time I get anxious about money, or my financial future, whenever I am tempted to reach out for a perfect world of financial security, I fall back on this graceful word of God.

A second passage that keeps my focus on God's grace is one I know you know that I know by memory because I use a variation of it every Sunday before I step behind this pulpit. It comes from Psalm 19: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." For the pastor, there is always the temptation to use unwisely or

unfaithfully the privilege granted to him or her of that ready and willing audience seated before them. There are no limits to what a pastor can say from the pulpit, except those placed on him or her by a conscience informed by grace and God's word, but it is often easy to confuse the message with the messenger, or the preacher's view of the common good with God's view of the common good. One of my Seminary professors tells the story of having delivered a brilliant and Scripturally sound, but rather self-righteous sermon indirectly blasting a faction in his church he believed to be causing a divisive conflict. And when he was receiving people at the door of the church following the service, one of his most loyal members and supporters, an elderly woman of long-standing in the church, said to him not, "Way to give it to 'em, Pastor," but instead she said, "Today, Pastor, you were unworthy of the pulpit." And he was humbled forevermore. There are sometimes good things to say that should remain unsaid, and with Psalm 19 in mind, I try to remember that it is not me speaking to you each week, but rather God speaking through me, or so I hope, and that if I want to remain faithful to the trust God has placed in me, I'd better be mindful of that fact.

The final passage I'd share with you from my own experience is the one which I made my own when I first began to take more seriously and personally the faith in which I had been raised. It comes from the fifth chapter of Second Corinthians, the seventeenth verse, "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come; see, everything has become new." I was, I

am, as they say, a “cradle Presbyterian,” born and raised in the church, a faithful attendee of Sunday School and youth group and youth choir, never any doubt I was a child of God, even if I behaved only as a child. I learned a great deal about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit and church and faithfulness from the church in which I was raised, much of which I fall back on even to this day. It was an extraordinary place for me to learn all those things, and I give thanks to God for it frequently. But there came a time when I needed to claim for myself what other people had been faithfully leading me toward, and that occasion came at a Young Life Camp in Saranac Lake, New York, when I was presented with that verse from Second Corinthians and challenged to take a look at just how new was my life, just what difference my faith was making. In what way was I a “new creation,” different, transformed, made over by God’s spirit? I admit to being a little puzzled by how I was supposed to be different suddenly, when all along I had been in the right place, but I began to see that what was new was that I needed to speak my faith in my own voice, to make my own commitment to follow God not because I had to go to church, but because I wanted to follow Jesus Christ and be a part of that great gift called the church. And so in that sense, I became a new person, and whenever I am feeling a little stale, whenever I begin to wonder if I am taking God’s grace for granted, I go back to that verse and challenge myself anew by asking, “how are you a new creation, newer than you were as a teenager, newer than you were even yesterday?”

There are many others I could share with you, and I hope in a little while, when the time comes, that some of you will share some of yours with the rest of us. But let me finish by simply saying that I don't think we can go wrong by taking our lead from Jesus in our story tonight, by remembering God's word when we face whatever trial, test, or temptation comes our way. It is not that by simply saying those verses aloud, the challenges we face will just disappear like so much vapor, dispersed by some kind of magical incantation, but that by holding onto what those verses promise, we'll experience the grace to see us through whatever challenges we face. At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus came out of the desert prepared for the challenges he would face by relying on God's word, and to the very end, he relied on God's word for the challenges he did face, and may God give us the strength to do the same, this Lent, and always. Amen.