

“Tempting God”

1st Sunday in Lent

Matthew 4:5-7

March 13, 2011

This story is an old and familiar story to all of us. Each of us can tell the story of the temptation of Jesus. We may not get all the details correct but the story is familiar. Yet, in taking a close look at what is familiar, new insights and findings occur. This then makes an old story new again. From my study I have discovered something new about the story and something new about us. First, let me share about the story.

What I find so significant is found more in to whom the story was written than the story itself. Sometimes we forget that all the Biblical writers were writing to someone specific. The gospels and letters were not addressed: “To whom it may concern.” Instead, they were addressed to specific people and congregations regarding specific problems. Matthew was no exception.

Matthew was writing to people who were struggling in their faith. They were struggling with a certain temptation. That temptation regarded the use and exercise of divine powers – more specifically miracles. The temptation was born out of a need to control verses complete acceptance of God’s will (loss of control): If miracles happen before why not now? If miracles can show people that Christians do have power that non-Christians don’t have then why not demonstrate that power? These questions are born out of a need to control. The temptation of Jesus is a story written to help Matthew’s audience understand why they are wrong and to see more clearly what God’s will is regarding this matter.

As humans we have a difficult time accepting these limitations. When these limits come after we are believers (as in Matthew’s case) it becomes even more increasingly difficult to accept.

Our minds tell us if we are of God then should we not demonstrate this by miracle? Let the people of God show the world who they belong to. In essence we want to take God’s power and place it in human hands that we may prove we are of God. But is that what is really happening? Is not the real issue one of obedience? To want power from God, do we not want it for ourselves, to overcome our insecurities, our misgiving, or our temptation? We ask, “Why should a Christian be powerless? We all have played this game in some fashion. Perhaps it’s not miracles we are after? Perhaps it’s nothing more than control over our lives? Think about it.

When we ask God for help, when we ask God to give our lives some direction what is our motivation? Why are we asking? It could be something genuinely seeking help and comfort for others. Yet, are there not instances of wanting anxiety to be removed, doubts to be overcome, or conclusive proof to be attained?

As many times as there are that these will help and guide us when they are answered, so there are times when answers come, as God says no to our requests. It is because often we ask God to help in order that we may keep control. Life may have gotten away from our control and that can produce anxiety and doubt. To get life back on track we ask God to demonstrate some power so we can feel comfortable again.

Having all the answers to all the questions doesn't guarantee happiness or security. Sometimes the only way to find these is to remain in situations where we have no control. It is then we learn to rely on God and as always, God proves faithful.

Jesus in his temptations did not allow his personal recipe for security to override his commitment to obey God. Obedience was more important than control (even when it meant times of doubt or uncertainty). Jesus was not about to submit to his temptation by taking God's power into his hands (in this case throwing himself down). Instead, Jesus trusted in God more and remained obedient to God. That obedience was to be powerless over his life and circumstances of that life.

When we seek God's power to relieve our anxiety about life we are tempting God. The reason I say this is because we are making God perform to show God exists. This is not a demonstration of faith but a demonstration of unbelief! God is not to be used like a stringed puppet. God's power is exercised for our sake and not the kingdom's. By doing this we are giving in to the temptation to prove God's existence.

Faith is exercised by not putting God to the test, by not tempting God. Matthew desperately wanted his audience to see this. Though they may appear powerless in their actions, by not seeking God to prove himself they were in fact proving God' existence and power through faith!

We can do no less! We must learn to accept that not all problems will be resolved, not all questions will be answered, and not all doubts will be removed. Yet, though they exist in our lives they are not the determining factor as if God exists or not. To give in to doubt and anxiety is to give in to the temptation that is displayed by tempting God. To demonstrate God's presence in our lives is to become powerless, obedient, it is to become people whose lives are modeled after Jesus.

AMEN

