

## **Who Are you?**

Menno Mennonite Church  
February 26, 2023: Lent 1, Year A

**Purpose:** To put the questions of lent into the context by which we are shaped.

**Message:** Lent invites us into the most essential questions of all—who are we and what do we really want.

**Scriptures:** Matthew 4:1-11 (I will read); Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7

**Synopsis:** There is much that shapes us. Our sense of self. Our choices, our histories, our experiences all contribute to who we ultimately are. Another essential question in like it: what is it, really, do we want? These stories—the temptations of the garden and of the desert ask these questions most essentially and invite us to answer along side Jesus: we are the followers of God, beloved each one and shaped to follow God’s way.

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**Matthew 4:1-11** <sup>NRS</sup>

Then

Jesus was led up by the Spirit  
into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan.

<sup>2</sup> He fasted forty days and forty nights,  
and afterwards he was famished.

<sup>3</sup> The tempter came and said to him,  
"If you are the Son of God,  
command these stones to become loaves of bread."

<sup>4</sup> But he answered, "It is written,  
'One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city  
and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,  
<sup>6</sup> 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.'"

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him,  
"Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain  
and showed him all the kingdoms of the world  
and their splendor;

<sup>9</sup> and he said to him,

"All these I will give you,  
if you will fall down and worship me."

<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him,  
"Away with you, Satan!  
for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him,  
and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

There is an old pastime to while away the hours on the road. After you have filled the hours with the license plate and alphabet game, played eye-spy for a little while, there is always the game of “would you rather.” I am sure it is familiar enough to you, but briefly you take two extremes—say crawling into the sleeping bag with a spider or a snake—and chose which one you prefer, with the fairly obvious option of “well, neither” being taken off the table. A choice has to be made, no matter how insane the proposition happens to be. It is a great way to while away the hours debating the relative virtues of two choices in comparison, and what the selection might say about the person making the selection. Even if it doesn’t really matter it can be revealing to hear how even those close to us make choices very differently. Sometimes all that there is to do is shake you head and move on to the next question even if you don’t understand the logic of the other.

If we are asked to personally identify with the temptations of Christ in the wilderness, it can be difficult to find our way into it. There is much here that, even as familiar as it may be, it seems a bit far out there. Few of us have encountered the devil in the midst of a fast, been presented with the power to change the world let alone found our way into them. This is part of the story of what makes Jesus Jesus—the spiritual super power Son of God that we know him to be. Accordingly this we read this as part of the Jesus resume, the back story to establish the full identity of the one with whom we are now led to follow. Similarly, we regard the Genesis temptation as our back story—that which can never really be removed as being universally true about us. We draw the comparison—we are what we are, and Jesus is what he is—and leave it at that. But I maintain that there is much more about what it means to be human beings to be dealt with in both stories.

These are stories of beginnings, bringing us back to the earliest moments of human and divine history. At the beginning of Lent, the season calling us back to the basic questions of who we are and what it is we really want. We are taken to the beginning to come to account with these fundamental questions by dealing with fundamental realities. That we are all tempted. We each know our own personal satans—the Hebrew and Greek translating literally as “the one who stand against”—who stands in our way of being all that we are called to be. Perhaps it is the complicated history that we carry with us, the voices of our souls that speak to us in the early hours of the night with anything but good to say. Maybe we struggle still to believe that the resurrection is possible for one like us—that should God get to know us that there is no way that

love could possibly prevail. What ever it happens to be, and what ever the voice shapes itself to be. We start here because we must: we are human, and as such we are tempted. The sin is not in facing temptation—it never has been and it never will be. The revealing comes in what we do with that reality that makes the difference.

Jesus as we encounter him in the wilderness is at a cross roads. You would think that being named the Son of God would be a fairly well defined role where you simply move into God's script and follow where God leads and that would be it. But this episode reminds us that there is more complication than that. First, note the temptation is always questioning the nature of Jesus: If you are the Son of God... the propositions are made. If you are who you have proclaimed to be, prove it. Do the stuff that we want God to do and the way we want God to do it—turn the world upside down and make it clear. Each of these temptations are real temptations in very real ways, and, what's more, temptations that are not limited in scope to the savior of the world. these are not asking Jesus to do something that was outside of his nature, contrary to his mission, or particularly change anything about his values. All of this was still there, still intact. Instead, the question was much more about HOW he was going to minister in the world, and how he was going to live out this identity of beloved son in the world. In many ways we are faced routinely with the same questions all the time. We know we are called to serve, but are we able to serve while pointing to the one who inspires the service? We want to establish that God is in the world, but are we willing to allow God's will to be done in God's way, and not in ours? We all want power, but are we willing to hold it loosely for the good of all? As he was starting his ministry, Jesus has to decide how he was going to fill the void of what it means to be Jesus, and that, ultimately, is something that is profoundly human.

We often talk of our lives living with a God shaped hole within our existence. Sometimes we are aware of it, sometimes we are not. Humans are always searching for meaning, life, and joy in all that we do. It is only through spiritual growth and awareness that we are able to name that desire what it really is: a seeking for God. It is sometimes said that we live with a God shaped hole within us. Folks in recovery and 12 step programs call this the void, a term I have grown to appreciate. In my time I have gotten to know many who know themselves to be in recovery. It is often a profound process for those who make it through to the other side. It is part of the program to realize the void within yourself, and to own the inclination to fill the void with what ever seems to fit that void whether that happens to be drink, drugs, anger, or any

of the other myriad behaviors we might chose. People do all sorts of things to meet these basic needs of being human. Like the food pyramid that reminds us how many servings of what we need in what proportions, we all have our emotional and spiritual needs which requires nourishment to satisfy and address. What 12 steps does well is that it names the truth—that the void exists, and filling the void remains important, requiring the “higher power” without whom we are powerless against that would tempt. This speaks beyond “you are tempted—don’t do that” and gives a much fuller more realistic diagnosis of the human condition, not just those for whom their behavior has turned toxic. Of course, there is personal strength needed to reform and refuse to travel the well-worn paths anymore. But understanding the human condition, that we all want to fill the void and that the only true fulfilment for that void is realistically that which is beyond us, is God, is something that we all need to learn and live no matter where we find ourselves in our life of pursuing the Holy. By giving the recovering this awareness you are building the resilience needed to change. There is a not a choice of whether or not the void will be with us or not, but rather what shapes does our personal void take and how we choose to fill it—the “would you rather question” if you will that fully matters in our lives.

Better than most, Jesus knew who he was and what he was doing. He knew who held him and believed in him—that had just been confirmed at his baptism. But that does not mean that he too did not have the void, the desire for something bigger within him. If he didn’t these offers of Satan would not have been temptations at all. Do good on your terms; live with full endorsement and beyond your own uncertainties; seek the power to prove all that you say and to change the world in such desperate need of reform one and for all. Answer the doubt-filled questions once and for all if you are who you say you are. Adam and Eve faced the void of wanting knowledge and seeking God not for knowing God but rather being God. Jesus faces the void and answers with the answer that we are each invited to hold the best we can: “I will face God, I will serve God in God’s way. I will trust God to fill the blanks of my life in God’s own time, and may that be enough.” It is this choosing that makes all the difference, a choice we are invited to time and again, no matter how many times we may have chosen otherwise.

Lent is our annual invitation to consider the big questions: who are you? What do you value most? and consider how you want your life, your faith to reflect those big questions. We do this well time and again if for no other reason than where there are no serious questions, there is no growth. It is here that we all start: invited to tell the truth as we know it be best that we can.

The truth that we are each, in our own ways, broken, each in our own ways filling the void meant for God in ways good and bad. I think the reminder of Ash Wednesday, of Lent that we are wholly human is not meant to be depressing or disregard the human condition. Rather the opposite—it is meant to affirm and take it seriously. It is asking us to remember that we did not create ourselves. It is meant to liberate us from the tyranny of needing to occupy the role of the divine, even as we accept that within our fragile, all too frail selves rests the creator's divine spark.

Our lives are lived in our choices, for the good and for the bad. It is these choices that show who we are. No single choice tells the whole story. We are invited, always to seek fully the kingdom of God in its many forms. May we know the void that calls to us, and in knowing it, proclaim the God who fills that void will all that we need, and rest in that. Amen.