

FOMO: Fear of Missing Out

Sermon 52 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 1, 2020

Matthew 4: 1 – 11

There is a pervasive fear emerging in society today. It is known by the hashtag or abbreviation #FOMO, which stands for “fear of missing out.” You can see it in these posts we found on social media recently:

[John Snow graphic “Winter is Coming”]

This was posted as the winter storm was starting up last weekend, “Forgot to get ingredients for French Toast before the snow came #FOMO #breadandmilk.”

[Metal Candle image]

And this one popped up on Valentine’s Day: “I enjoy being single, I loathe Hallmark Holidays, so why do I have #FOMO... Ugh!”

[Disney, Magic Kingdom image]

Not sure if you can read all of this from your seats but it’s an article shared from “scarymommy.com” entitled, “We have FOMO for our Children, and we Need to get it figured out ASAP.” The post also critiques modern parenting practices which offer far too many elaborate and expensive experiences for children. Because...we don’t want our kids to miss out on anything.

[Meghan Duffy quote]

Here’s an online conversation that unfolded on twitter this January:

@Namnezia wrote: “I generally do very little work-related travel compared to most of my colleagues. On average one meeting a year and one or two seminars. as it had a negative impact on my career? Probably. /1”

@duffy_ma (Meghan Duffy) shared @Namnezia’s comment saying: “I also limit my work-related travel. It’s so hard to say no to invitations, and seeing all the fun tweets from meetings I missed triggers #FOMO, but I agree with @Namnezia that extra time w/family & productive time back home make it worth it.

[Elissa Blake quote]

“Hey friends, I’m taking a small theatre break right now because I’m managing a few health issues and rest and sleep is a priority. Health before theatre is new for me. Please see all the things and tell me what they were like. #fomo.”

Fear of Missing Out invades our social lives, it informs our parenting choices, it clouds our professional and personal boundaries and it even gets in the way of our ability to make healthy choices about our physical well-being. Did you catch what the last one said?

“...health before theatre is new for me. Please see all the things and tell me what they were like...”

Just in case we are not convinced by a few social media posts, we may be interested to learn that many social scientists now study FOMO, fear of missing out, and they're publishing fascinating articles and books on how it is pervasive in our society today. FOMO shapes the ways that we interact with one another and it impacts the choices that we make about where we will be and how we will be present there.

Psychologist blames FOMO on our inability to separate ourselves from our smartphones and tablets. They claim that we are afraid to miss out on the possibility of connecting with friends online or on our devices. They claim we are afraid that we might miss out on something bigger, more important, or more entertaining than the situation we are currently in. They claim we are afraid we might miss out on the latest breaking news and then look silly or ill-informed when we learn news later than our peers.ⁱ We are afraid that if we separate ourselves from the sources of connectivity, we will miss out on something worthy of our ultimate concern.

Perhaps the most alarming bit of the research, however, includes a bit about the algorithms that orchestrate our feeds. Those mathematical formulas (just like the 24 hour cable news cycles) are set up to feed on our fear of missing out. The more fearful we become, the more we rely on them as our primary and constant sources of information.

The science suggests that FOMO is much more than a trending social media hashtag...

FOMO in its most current iteration is just another example of the ways we seek to control our environment, so that we can set ourselves up for success - personally, socially, and professionally.

Even though the term and these expressions are relatively new, the fear is as old as time itself. And this timeless fear is rooted in our very human desires for pride, power, and possessions. We are drawn to them because they make us feel safe and insulated from that which is unknown and unpredictable. If we could provide for ourselves, if we could survive the unthinkable, if we could live our lives protected by the walls of earthly kingdoms... we would never have to deal with the wilderness of the human experience.

Tempting, isn't it?

In today's reading, Matthew tells a story about Jesus facing similar temptations. Before we arrive at chapter 4, let's refresh our memories about what has been happening in chapters 1 – 3. The story begins with a long genealogy, a family history connecting Jesus all the way back to Abraham, twenty-eight generations including some big names like David, Solomon, and Ruth. Then we meet Mary who is engaged to Joseph but is found to be miraculously with child. Once the babe is born, the migration begins as the holy family

crosses over national boundaries into Egypt to escape the slaughter that awaits them at the hands of their King. They claim refuge in Egypt and wait to return home until Herod is dead. In chapter three when Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are safely settled in Nazareth, the focus shifts to the wilderness, where John the Baptist echoes the words of the Hebrew prophets saying: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."

As the story unfolds, there is one character directing the action from behind the scenes. One key player guiding and orchestrating the divine drama of Matthew's Gospel... It is the Spirit who ensures the lineage from Abraham to Jesus. It is the Spirit who sends life-saving messages through dreams and angels. It is the Spirit who speaks through the mouths of the Hebrew prophets, and it is God's Holy Spirit who blesses the one to whom the whole story points, affirming Jesus at his baptism saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

"Then..." chapter 4 begins, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." (v.1) God is still at work, driving the plot and leading the characters to the places they need to go. Here, God leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted.

Once Jesus is there, he faces the three most basic temptations of human existence: pride, power, and material possession. In a dramatic narrative the tempter dares Jesus to turn stone into bread, disrupting his fast in order to feed his human hunger. Then he lures Jesus up to the top of the Jerusalem Temple, daring him to put God to the test, in a fantastic display of power. And finally, he shows Jesus the kingdoms of this world, with all their splendor, saying, "All of these, I will give to you. If only you will bow down and worship me."

It is a fantastic story, but in light of all we have read so far in Matthew's Gospel we have to wonder... why would God lead Jesus into this trap? Reading the text and considering how it might speak to us today at the beginning of our Lenten journeys... I wonder if we struggle to make sense of this scripture? I wonder if we struggle to find ourselves within it and therefore struggle to let it inform our lives?

Like Nurya Love Parish, the author of the quote printed on the inside cover of our worship guides today, we know very little, if anything at all of that devil who walks and talks among us. We know very little of the challenge to throw ourselves off a high tower in order to prove that we are immortal; and we know only in part, about the wealth of entire kingdoms. But I wonder if... we do know a little something about the lure of satisfaction; and I wonder if we do know a bit about the idea of immortality or at least the preservation of our youth. And I bet many of us understand the deep-seeded desire for material possessions.

In an article she writes for Christian Century, Parish describes reading this story in Matthew's Gospel for the first time and struggling to make sense of it. So far removed from the original setting and without any devils or deserts in sight, she struggled to find herself in the story. But then she realized that the story isn't just about Jesus, it was about her too. And the story wasn't just about her and Jesus, it was about all of humanity too. In that article she writes, "I knew from the history books and the newspapers that we all struggle with pride, power, and possession. People and nations fight, kill, and die over who is worthy of respect, who gets control, and who owns what. "The more I thought about it," she continues, "the more these three simple words seemed to be at the heart of the human experience. [pride, power, possessions] IT began to make complete sense that these were the temptations that the devil offered Jesus. They were the same temptations that the devil still offered me."ⁱⁱ

With this expanded lens it becomes a little easier to recognize ourselves in the temptations. But the story isn't only about the temptations, it is also about how the Spirit leads Jesus to respond to them...

When tempted to put himself first, Jesus puts God first – choosing spiritual nourishment of fast over bodily nourishment. Face to face with these temptations, Jesus chooses to trust in God rather than putting God to the test. And finally, in the wilderness of temptation, Jesus chooses relationship with God over and above the promise of material wealth... Jesus responds to temptation... choosing God first each and every time, choosing faith in God over the fear of missing out on personal, social, and material gains.

As followers of Jesus, we live our lives in the wilderness and we are called to respond to every temptation in the same way as Jesus. Choosing God in every arena of our lives as we face the timeless temptations of pride, power, and possessions. As followers of Jesus we are called to live without fear of missing out because when we are where God calls us to be, living as God calls us to live, we aren't missing anything at all. We are right where God's kingdom is being born into this world.

You may have noticed that in the story, as soon as Jesus renounces the third and final temptation, the angels rush in to attend to him and to be with him. It makes me wonder if they were waiting just out of sight, blocked perhaps, by the lure of pride, power, and possessions.

Lenten journey is our time

Re orientation

Loosen ourselves from the lure of pride, power, possessions

Release our fear of missing out knowing that when we are where God calls us to be, we are right where we need to be.

To commit to a Lenten journey means giving up some of those same things. To commit to a Lenten journey means that we will have to miss out on some of the luxuries of this world. Perhaps we have given up chocolate or alcohol, perhaps using foul language or

thinking unkind thoughts. Or maybe we've given up cable news or social media... whatever it is we have decided to set aside for the season, it means we will inevitably miss out on some of the things we have grown to love. But that's ok. We don't need to be afraid. When we follow the Spirit's lead into the wilderness, we can have faith that somewhere nearby, just out of sight, and perhaps even blocked by the very things we need to give up...

...God is waiting to welcome us back, right where we need to be.

ⁱ <https://psychcentral.com/blog/fomo-addiction-the-fear-of-missing-out/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/march-5-first-sunday-lent?reload=1582918672765>