

Three Timeless Tempters
Sermon 169 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 22, 2023
Matthew 4:1-17

Recently, Justin and I have been watching Amazon Prime's, *Poldark*. It is a story, set in England after the American Revolution. As the drama unfolds, the characters wrestle with the assumption of the moral goodness of high society. Revolutions are happening around the world and they are championing equality and ideas of democracy. So the characters in *Poldark* have to make choices about whether or not they will sacrifice their own personal status for the greater good.

There is a beautiful scene in which one character, Elizabeth Poldark - after losing her husband in a mining accident has to decide whether or not to accept the marriage proposal of a wealthy and morally questionable man... It is clear that she isn't sold on the suitor's character but she is drawn to the financial security that he offers, as well as the station in society his adoption would offer to her son.

In her discernment, her old Aunt Agatha (a wise fool kind of character) says in a low voice, just barely loud enough for Elizabeth to hear...

"And he took him up on a high mountain, showing him all the kingdoms of the world and promising him their wealth...."

Elizabeth Poldark knew the reference, rolled her eyes, and walked out of the scene.

It is hard to find another piece of scripture that has been adopted into film or literature as often as this one.

There are cinematic interpretations that are straightforward, like scenes from Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. There are many, many more films and books that more subtly remind us of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. From Milton to Dostoevsky, from C.S. Lewis to J.K. Rowling, the thought of a devil lurking in the shadows or wearing the mask of a villain parading around in and out of our lives seems to electrify our senses and beckon our attention.

What is it about the nature of temptation that we find so, well... tempting?

Perhaps we grew up with the idea that the devil was the red-colored, mystical creature that danced around our lives with horns on his head and a pitchfork in his hand. Sometimes he even stood on one of our shoulders while the angel stood on the other offering advice for every choice we had to make. The devil was bad; the angel was good. In this overly dualistic example, it was always clear that choosing the way of the angel was right; and choosing the way of the devil was wrong - even if it did seem a little more fun.

In the Bible, when we first meet the devil, he comes in the form of a talking snake who slithers onto the scene offering fruit from the forbidden tree, turning the attention of the

first human beings away from the gift of the garden and toward the one thing they seemed to lack. And then the devil appears in Matthew's Gospel. Here he lurks in the corner of the wilderness awaiting Jesus' arrival. It is amazing how quickly Matthew pivots from promise to sin, from blessing to temptation as we move from chapter three to chapter four. It is literally in the next narrative breath after the words of divine blessing, *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*, the very next sentence is this: *Then, Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

There, in the desert, Jesus is tempted three times. First to solve the problem of his personal hunger by turning stone into bread. Then to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, testing God to save him. Last, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world offering him their wealth, all for the small price of his allegiance. But Jesus has already declared his allegiance and here he does not waver.

There have been many sermons on the nature of these three timeless tempters. Sermons reminding us of the ways that power, prestige, and material possessions draw us away, steal our attention, and sell us on the lie that the three of them or any one on its own could lead us to a particular vision of *the good life*. And there must be something to it because we *are* tempted! We are drawn to the power to change stones into bread, to change our immediate situation from famine to feast. Whether it is bread to fill our bellies or some other kind of situational hunger we seek to satisfy. It is attractive and appealing to imagine a quick solution to our acute problems.

Then there is the desire toward prestige. This is the temptation of the over-inflated ego, the one that tells us we are more important than anyone else, more deserving of all that we have. This is where we fall prey to the lie that everything we have, we built or earned ourselves. This second temptation would like for us to believe that we could truly be self-sufficient, that we do not need the company of friends or the contributions of strangers. That between us and God, we can save ourselves from even the most ridiculous situations. The attraction here, of course, is that the myth of prestige elevates us away from the careful, constant, and vulnerable work that community requires.

The final temptation is one that is so prevalent, it sometimes encompasses the prior two - the lure of money and material possessions. This third tempter would love for us to believe that money would solve all other problems. That with money we would never be hungry, with money we wouldn't need anyone else, with money we could make our own rules and live our own lives the way we want to. With money, we could experience the American dream. With money, we wouldn't have to worry. If we just had more money... everything would be easier. But as Notorious B.I.G. reminded us with his hit single in 1997, more money just means more problems. This third temptation is as empty as the devil himself.

These six weeks between Epiphany and the beginning of Lent, as we are working our way through the first part of Matthew's Gospel, some of these isolated stories are gaining new perspective because we are beginning to see them in context. Yes, we all know the story of

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, but do we often consider what it means that it happens right after his baptism?

These stories (baptism and temptation) are connected in that they are the only two stories that tell us what happened to Jesus between infancy and ministry. They move us - as they move Jesus - from baptism to temptation, from blessing to struggle, teaching us about who Jesus is and by default, teaching us about who we are as his followers.

Caught somewhere between the blessing of baptism and the wilderness of temptation, we spend most of our lives with a constant battering of choices and ever-present trials that humble us and bring us to our knees. It is in these deserts, in the midst of our utmost vulnerability that the tempters come with their promises of false salvation. Save yourself! Turn this stone into bread. I thought you said God loved you; See if God will save you now. Look, all of this could be yours if only...

As much as we might like to think the choices are as clear as our caricatures of the devil, the distinction between good and evil is not always so cut and dry.

In his assessment of the text, Richard Rohr reminds us, "We can only be tempted to do something that is good on some level, partially good, or good for some, or just good for us and not for others. Temptations are always about 'good' things, [otherwise] we could not be tempted[...]." Most of our daily choices "are not between total good and total evil, but between various shades of good, a partial good that is wrongly perceived as an absolute good (because of the self as the central reference point), or even evil that disguises itself as a 'good'. These are what get us into trouble."¹

But Jesus is a master of discernment. He sees through the devil's empty promises and responds not with simple moralistic commandments copied from one context and pasted to another, but with divine Wisdom quoted from the book of Deuteronomy - Wisdom that reminds us who Jesus is (the Beloved Son of God) and what he is about (the Kingdom of God).

A little *Poldark* spoiler alert - close your ears if you don't want to know - Elizabeth Poldark ultimately chose to marry George Warlegan and while he did deliver on the promise of wealth and station in society, the choice ultimately led to her demise and the deterioration of every relationship she held dear... even that of her firstborn son.

We live so much of our lives between baptism and temptation. Both take place in the wilderness - which I think is an important detail as it affirms the chaos we feel as life takes its toll. In one moment we feel close to God, loved and accepted, with a clear understanding of our identity and purpose... and in the next, we feel lost, uncertain, and without any inkling of what we should do next.

¹ <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/lent-with-richard-rohr-temptations-are-attractions-to-partial-goods/>

But in the vulnerability of the wilderness, between baptism and temptation, between receiving God's blessing of belatedness and pressing on with our purpose, we have to remember that these three timeless tempters lurk around every corner offering simple answers and quick fixes to life's most challenging circumstances. Sometimes these tempters even show up and parade around pretending to be righteous - like the prosperity Gospel that promises personal wealth and material rewards for holy living, or the ideology of Christian Nationalism that sells the Christian faith in exchange for political power.

Friends, our tempters may wear modern clothing, but beneath the surface, we can surely see that they are as old as time itself. And if we are to become followers of Jesus, we must also become masters of discernment who - like Jesus - ground ourselves not in the temporary promises of personal power, prestige, or material possessions, but in the timeless and eternal Wisdom of God.