

Pastor's Message – 2/26/23
Matthew 4:1-11

I've been working with the UCC Pastor Jacob Nault on joint Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services and found out that they, unlike the Waupun United Methodist Church, do not use paper bulletins except for a few large print copies at all. They depend entirely on their projection screen. Many of you were probably disappointed at my inability to get the Live Stream working for our Ash Wednesday service. It was disappointing and discouraging and frustrating and there are still things to learn about technology. There is so much to learn and so many different formats to learn.

More than 30 years after the first website went online, it is clear that we are still living through a period of dizzying transition. For five hundred years after Gutenberg, the dominant form of information was the printed page: knowledge was primarily delivered in a fixed format, one that encouraged readers to believe in stable and settled truths.

Now, we are caught in a series of confusing battles between opposing forces: between truth and falsehood, fact and rumor, kindness and cruelty; between the few and the many, the connected and the alienated; between the open platform of the web as its architects envisioned it and the gated enclosures of Facebook and other social networks; between an informed public and a misguided mob.

What is common to these struggles -- and what makes their resolution an urgent matter -- is that they all involve the diminishing status of truth. This does not mean that there are no truths. It simply means ... that we cannot agree on what those truths are, and when there is no consensus about the truth and no way to achieve it, chaos soon follows.

Increasingly, what counts as a fact is, more and more, someone's opinion -- and technology has made it very easy for these "facts" to circulate with a speed and reach that was unimaginable in the Gutenberg era (or even a decade or two ago).

Anyone who goes on line and does any kind of a search for information will get more than they bargained for. Not only can you get almost seemingly unlimited information on what you're searching for, you may also be inundated with information and ads that you didn't ask for.

Savvy Internet users call this "clickbait," which refers to any ad or link with a shocking, salacious or teasing headline and/or photo designed to pique your curiosity and suck you in. The headline usually doesn't deliver what it offers, and your "click" usually results in a succession of more ads and useless information.

For example, just looking for information on our Bible passage from Matthew today have turned up these clickbait links:

"Brady Bunch Secrets That Will Leave You Speechless."

"American Residents Born Between 1936 and 1966 Are in for a ..."

"What 'Star Trek' Cast Looks Like Now Is Jaw-Dropping."

"21 Facts About the Amish Most People Don't Know."

Click on any of those and you could burn an hour without even realizing it.

It's no wonder, then, that the devil himself is a master of clickbait. He's always trying to get people distracted from what really matters, he doesn't deliver on what he promises and he plays havoc with people who are driven by emotion rather than by faith. Biblically speaking, there's no greater example of how his clickbait strategy works than the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

Clickbait Headline 1: "Making bread out of stones? The shocking dietary revolution that will change your life!"

The devil's first piece of clickbait is to get Jesus to use his power to transform stones into bread (vv. 3-4). That must have been a real temptation for one who was "hungry" after 40 days without food. Of course, we know that Jesus was quite capable of pulling off this miraculous recipe there in the desert. He could turn water into wine; he could certainly turn stones into bread. All four gospels report that he could feed 5,000-plus people with just five loaves of bread and two fish, which was a sign of God's provision throughout his ministry.

Jesus understood, however, that this clickbait temptation was about focusing on the product rather than the source. The Israelites wandering in the desert eventually got sick of eating manna day after day and pined to go back to Egypt where the menu had more variety: meat and fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic (Numbers 11:1-6). They ignored the fact that God was the one keeping them alive and leading them toward the promised land. Bread alone wasn't enough to keep the people satisfied after all.

Jesus responded to the devil by quoting Moses' own warning to the people: "[God] humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." (v. 4; cf. Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus was not dependent on his own ability to provide for himself and his people, but on God's provision and on God's promises. He knew that the devil's temptation was to produce a product rather than rely on the ultimate source from whom every good thing comes. Both he and his people needed more than a steady diet of bread -- they needed a steady diet of God and the Word to sustain them for the long haul.

Sometimes, we're tempted to seek the quick and easy route to fill our empty bellies and empty souls. We fill up on products, both spiritual and material, that satisfy our need for a while. Jesus invites us to consider that the only thing that will truly satisfy us is the presence of God who supplies all that we need. That's the reason Jesus will later tell his disciples to pray for their "daily bread," and not for bread for a lifetime (6:11). When we feed on the Word of God and the Bread of Life, we are on a diet that brings health for eternity!

Clickbait Headline 2: "Man jumps from incredible height with no parachute. You won't believe what happens next!"

The devil's second clickbait temptation was to get a kind of YouTube video of Jesus jumping off the pinnacle of the temple into the Kidron Valley with no net and no chute (v. 6). The fall would have meant certain death, but the devil was certain that Jesus could land unhurt.

Such a video would have gone viral instantly and ensured Jesus' celebrity status among all the people, not just the scraggly band of disciples and hangers-on who followed him around. The devil even tries to bait Jesus by using Scripture, quoting Psalm 91:11-12 to pump up the fact that God would provide an angelic safety net for the jump: "For he will order his angels to protect you wherever you go. They will hold you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone." (NLT).

But, like a lot of clickbait of the semi-religious variety, the devil uses Scripture out of context. Psalm 91:9-10 says that God's protection is for circumstances that *befall* his people and not for those who stupidly test God by taking foolish risks, especially when those risks are designed to impress others. "If you make the Lord your refuge, if you make the Most High your shelter, no evil will conquer you; no plague will come near your home" (NLT).

In response to the devil's clickbait, Jesus cites Deuteronomy 6:16 which refers to Israel's testing of God in the wilderness by complaining about their lack of water: "Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah." Jesus says this right to the devil's face. "You want me to jump off this

pinnacle? Not going to happen. Scripture says not to test God" (NIV).

Jesus had no doubts about the presence of God. He had nothing to prove. At the very beginning of his ministry, he was convinced he was following the will of the Father. Only hours or days before, he'd been baptized in the River Jordan, and the heavens had opened and he had seen the "Spirit of God descending like a dove on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy" (3:17). In fact, those words are the last words of chapter 3. Immediately after those words are spoken, according to verse 1 of our text, Jesus is led by the same Spirit to the wilderness.

Does the devil think that Jesus might not believe that the God who was with him in the waters of baptism just hours or days ago, was no longer with him now? Does the devil think that Jesus might actually test God's faithfulness and presence by flinging himself off the temple pinnacle without a birdman suit, looking like a crazed flying squirrel?

We can't know what the devil thought, but we do know what Jesus thought. It was a stupid idea to think that God was not with him.

We don't test God that way. The lesson here is we don't tempt God; we don't test God. We don't make our plans and expect God to bless them. We build our lives around God's plans for us.

Clickbait Headline 3: "The secret to world domination. It's easier than you think!"

"All the kingdoms of the world" have never really belonged to the devil, but his final offer is to make Jesus the kind of ruler the devil could live with -- one who worships him (v. 8). That kind of ruler is the kind of political and military leader the world normally expects -- one who exercises power to keep everything in line without needing God's help to do it. The devil offers Jesus the world as it is and as everyone expects it to be. All he needs to do is to "fall down and worship" the devil and the devil's way of owning and manipulating human hearts.

But Jesus is not interested in the world as it is and as everyone expects it to be. He will come out of the wilderness preaching the reign and rule of God on the earth (v. 17). This is a quite different governing system than the devil's rule.

The devil's kingdom is a kingdom of darkness; God's is a kingdom of light.

The devil's kingdom is all about domineering authority; God's kingdom is about servanthood.

The devil's kingdom is about coercion, violence, and bondage; God's kingdom is about peace.

The devil's kingdom is about the "pleasure principle"; God's kingdom is about holiness and right living.

The devil's kingdom is based on lies and deception; God's kingdom is about the truth, which sets us free.

The devil's kingdom is a culture of death; God's kingdom is a culture of life.

Jesus said that it is the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers and the persecuted who will inherit this kingdom -- those who "worship the Lord [their] God and serve only him" (v. 10).

Unfortunately, many people still look to Jesus mainly for miracles. Our lives and our world are far from perfect, but we don't need to worry about that, because Jesus will fix everything...Like a dictator with absolute power – or a fairy godmother with her magic wand – he'll clean up our personal messes, overthrow the wicked, and set all the wrongs of the world right! It appeals to people because it's an easy way out. It relieves us of responsibility. We can leave it to Jesus –or to some other substitute...

One child asked, "Why did God let Jesus be tempted and why three times? Once would have been enough." The mother replied, "When I taught you to walk, I stood in front of you and held out my arms so

you would not fall. But when you came close, I moved away over and over so that you learned to walk."

As you know or you might guess, this was not the end of it for Jesus. He would be tempted again. And it is not the end of it for us. The work of fighting the powers - of renouncing the spiritual forces of wickedness, rejecting the evil powers of this world, and repenting of our sins as we say in our baptismal promises—is ongoing work for each one of us. It isn't one time. We have to continually resist the temptations of this world.

So the church takes this time every year during the season of Lent to remind ourselves that we need to join Jesus in the resistance by fasting, and by meditating on God's Word, and by holding one another accountable in Christian love and witness. We can't skip over this step. We have to be with him and with one another in this journey toward what it means to be in a shared life together as the body of Christ. Our reliance on God for help can't come just at the time of trial.

There's a story about a passenger on a boat on Lake Michigan during a violent storm far from shore. He was well known as a preacher. The storm was so severe that people began praying for survival -- saying the Lord's Prayer, reciting the rosary or murmuring silent prayers under their breath.

Some people noticed that the preacher wasn't anywhere to be found, so one man went looking for him. He found the reverend sitting on deck, on the bow, facing the wind and riding the swells as the boat rocked back and forth. The man shouted, "Why aren't you down below praying with us?"

The preacher man said, "No need. I'm all prayed up."

Maybe that's the edge smarter people have when it comes to temptation: They know they need God's help every day and they stay prayed up.

In the words of one pastor, "If you're looking for inspiration on the meaning of Lent, then you might as well start where it begins, by looking in the mirror." What does Lent have to do with looking at myself in a mirror?

Lent begins with Jesus in the wilderness. Lent begins as Jesus is tempted by Satan to turn from God in order to have food, safety, and power. Lent begins as Jesus refutes every one of Satan's temptations. Lent begins as we are reminded that "we are not to live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Lent begins as we are reminded that "You must not test the LORD your God." (Matthew 4:7b). Lent begins as we are reminded that we are to "worship the LORD your God and serve only him." (Matthew 4:10b). Lent begins as "the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus." (Matthew 4:11).

Lent continues as Jesus turns from Satan's temptations, leaves the wilderness, and begins to preach and teach the Good News of God. Before Jesus could begin to preach and teach the Good News of God he had to come face to face with the power of Satan. Before Jesus could journey toward the cross he had to see that the need for salvation was great. When we look into a mirror we are reminded that we, too, must look into the depths of our souls and see the need for God's forgiveness. When I look into the mirror, I see a person who desperately needs God's grace every moment of every hour. "I need thee every hour . . ."

The good news in our story today is that the power of God in Christ is stronger than the power of Satan. The power of good always triumphs over the power of evil, and the power of life—of resurrection—trumps the power of death and destruction every time. There is hope for our future despite the spiritual forces of wickedness and evil powers of this world that we must fight against.

As we go about our daily lives, there are plenty of pop-up temptations that cross our paths and our screens every day. Jesus invites us to turn our attention to the wilderness, to the Word and to his wisdom.

They're the only ads that really deliver! That's the good news of salvation! That's the good news of grace!