

**St John United Church of Christ**  
**Rev. Barbara Lohrbach**  
**February 10, 2008**

**Matthew 4:1-11**      **Remaining Human**

*The sales executive had finally got his chance to make the Really Big Sale. As he was ushered into the office of the executive buyer, an assistant brought her coffee and left. The atmosphere was cordial, and he knew he was giving his best presentation ever. Then the assistant tapped on the door, re-entered the office and spoke briefly with the executive. She stood and said, "I apologize, but I have to tend to a matter. I'll just be a minute or two." And she followed her assistant out of the room.*

*The sales representative saw her family pictures on her desk. Then he noticed a contract on her desk. She had evidently been studying a bid from a competitor. Leaning forward, he could see the column of figures, but it was obscured by a diet soda can. He was tempted to move the can and see the bottom line of his competitor's bid. After wrestling with himself a while, he finally decided to take a peek. As he lifted the soda can, he discovered that the can wasn't filled with soda at all. Instead it was a bottomless can filled with 1,000 BBs which gushed out, and ran all over the desk and cascaded onto the carpet. His attempt to short cut the competition was exposed.*

Temptation...no matter how much we progress as human beings, we never overcome it completely.

With the waters of baptism still clinging to him, Jesus enters the wilderness, where for forty days and forty nights he fasts and prays. For the early readers of Matthew, the 40 days was a connection to Moses who was on the mountain for forty days and nights, to the Hebrews who wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and to Elijah who journeyed for 40 days to Mt. Horeb. The writer of this gospel wants his Jewish readers to know that Jesus is who Matthew says Jesus is—God's son, God's beloved.

Jesus' wilderness experience continues the initiation begun by the ritual of his baptism. Son of God he may be, but here at the outset of his human ministry, he needs this liminal space, this in-between place, to deepen his clarity and to prepare him for what lies ahead. In this harsh landscape, bereft of any comforts that might distract him, Jesus comes to a vivid knowing about who he is and what is essential to his ministry. When the devil shows up at the end of his fast, Jesus is so centered and clear that nothing the tempter says can distract or entice him.

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The tempter, the devil, acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God and then quotes scripture...Hebrew scripture that further ties Jesus to the promised Messiah.

- God provided bread for the Hebrew people in the wilderness. Jesus can do the same for himself.
- Jesus is the Son of God—the angels will save him...Hebrew scripture says it's true.
- Worship me, Jesus and all this will be yours. “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone” rings loudly in Jesus’ ears and he angrily tells the devil to get lost.

Jesus has the power. He has already been proclaimed as the Son, the beloved. *The heart of Jesus’ temptation was to misuse the power he possessed.* Jesus could have used God’s power and God’s gifts to further his own privilege. Jesus could have been fully God in that moment. Jesus stayed fully human.

Jesus is prepared to proclaim with his whole life the kind of self-giving love, radical openness and unconditional love and forgiveness that is the character of the God of Israel. This is the Jesus that Matthew wants us to follow. Each of the three temptations invites Jesus to bypass suffering. In each he is offered triumph and glory. Triumph and glory in our world is known as 15 minutes of fame.

In our context the bread of Jesus’ temptation is humankind’s insatiable need for more—more stuff, more material goods...more, more, more. In the midst of today’s economy is the great fear that we won’t buy enough. I’m not an economist but I understand the sound bites that indicate the fear of economic recession.

And what about God’s protection? There was the story of the man who got into the lion’s den because he knew that God would keep the lion from eating him. The results were as we would expect—lioness wins. That part of Jesus’ temptation is always the easiest for me to grasp. I believe in God’s power and God’s promises, but I am not going to jump off a tall building to prove it to someone.

The story is told of a person who falls off the cliff and manages to grab a branch and hold on. The person prays loudly, “God help me.” A voice is heard and says, “Let go. I’ll catch you.” The person says, “Is there anybody else up there?”

The narrative begins by noting that the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, then concludes with the devil leaving him, and angels coming to wait upon Jesus. But during the time of testing Jesus is apparently on his own with the devil. This is how temptation works. It isolates. It shows up when we are craving

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solace. It seeks us out when we are vulnerable. Jesus has the strength to withstand temptation even when he is alone. The ashes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday remind us that we are mortal. We do not have his capacity to always say no to temptation when we—individuals or congregations—are isolated, in need and weak.

In 12-Step programs like AA, one of the keys to recovery from habitually saying yes to temptation is partnership with a sponsor who is available 24/7 when temptation threatens to overwhelm. What might our congregations look like if they were communities of mutual support in the face of temptations? Who in our congregation would we phone when we found ourselves tempted again to shop ‘til we drop? Who could we call on to help us avoid the temptation to walk away from a neighbor in pain? Who could we call if our anger was out of control and we were afraid of what might happen? Why is this practice the norm in a 12-Step group but so unusual in the church of Jesus Christ?

The good news is that Jesus remained as God who became one of us. Jesus went through his fully human life with a hunger and thirst for God’s ways. Jesus continued to live as one of us so that we might know how to live ourselves. Jesus stayed with us.

In this part of the journey each church year, we come to this place called Lent... Lent which simply means spring. Every year we wish that we could get to spring without going through winter, but it’s not possible.

If we try to get to the resurrection without the life and death of Jesus, we end up with a super hero...and not a companion who knows what it is like to be in our skin...this fully human Jesus.

Our life’s journey takes us into the wilderness as well. Even though we often don’t think we possess any power, the truth is...we do. So we have to ask ourselves the hard questions...Do we seek our own advantage? Do we want things for ourselves that others can’t have? Do we use our God-given powers for ourselves or for the well-being of the community? Do we succumb to the idea that others matter less than us?

To be a follower of Jesus means the answer is no...for although we may not possess the powers of the Son of God, we do possess power and privilege.

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The tempter came at Jesus with scripture, the word of God, and attempted to lure Jesus away from being one of us and from the role of servant he believed was so much like the character and heart of God.

Jesus came at the tempter with scripture...the word of God that had nurtured him as a young boy. The word of God had given Jesus a hunger and thirst for justice. The word of God had given Jesus a deep compassion for the poor and oppressed, the sick and the lame, the widow and the orphan...anyone in need.

A man stood before God, his heart breaking from the pain and injustice in the world. "Dear God," he cried out, "look at all the suffering, the anguish and distress in your world. Why don't you send help?" God responded, "I did send help. I sent you."