

*Coming Of The King -
Tempted*

Matthew 4:1-11

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It doesn't take much. A few degrees off course. That's all it was. 30 feet one way or the other. In a large body of water, who really would notice – right?

Pontiac Bay – last summer.

Some of you heard about this incident via my weekly PKN email.

Sharon and I were out on our sailboat for a few days of R&R.

Inching our way around this shallow bay by the Tim Horton's camp, across from Fitzroy Harbor Provincial Park.

Thought I had it all lined up right.

Remembered the chart from last year.... I thought.

And was close.

Pretty close.

Within thirty feet close. Actually, probably less than that.

Just a few degrees off course..... when I actually checked the charts.

which was later.....

So.....

...I ended up having to climb out of our boat and stand on the rock.

Water was only thigh deep at that point.

Sharon hung off the rigging on the far side to tip the boat to its side.

I actually have no idea how long it took for us to finally get the thing off the rocks and back under way. But it sure set a negative tone for the rest of the day. And disrupted the schedule.

Yes, it doesn't take much to throw things off.

Jesus is preparing for a journey of sorts – preparing for his journey as Messiah.

The prep work has been completed.

The last stage of preparation was a wonderful, affirming, spiritual high in his baptism.

Now the journey of Messiahship lies ahead.

And the question is – will he go in the right direction?

The course that is prepared for him to follow – will he chart it correctly, or wander off even by a few degrees?

Because, you see, it wouldn't take much to disrupt his plans, or to even disqualify him completely from fulfilling his role as Messiah.

Let's read Matthew's account of the temptation of Jesus:

MATTHEW 4:1-11, p.3 (New Testament)

Don't you find the first verse rather odd?

It says that Jesus was led **by the Spirit** into the Wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

I find it helpful to realize that the Greek words for

"to tempt"

and

"to test"

are really one and the same.

Translators have to judge by the context which is meant.

It's not always readily apparent.

Sometimes you can only tell afterwards, by considering the whole event in context.

And isn't that often how things go in our lives?

When our lives hit a patch of turbulence we can't really tell if we're going through testing or temptation.

And the two are quite different.

Testing has a noble purpose – it is meant to strengthen, to refine, to purify, to focus.

Tempting has a diabolical purpose – it is meant to weaken, to pollute, to destroy, to confuse.

Testing is from above.

Temptation is from below.

Both can be very difficult. And when we're in the middle of struggling with whatever it is, we can't always tell which one we're facing.

And, quite frankly, we don't always need to know what label to slap on our situation.

What matters more than the label, you see, is our response.

In fact, it is so that what Satan means for our destruction, God in his higher and sovereign way, can take - yes, he can take that very same event -

and turn it for our good. (Genesis 50:20)

And that is what is happening here.

Jesus has just had an amazing experience of affirmation.

He'd gone into the river and been baptized. Heaven had opened and spoken that he was God's Son, the Beloved, and was well pleasing to the Lord.

The Holy Spirit had descended on him.

John had honored him.

Fabulous, affirming event!

An empowering moment if there ever was one.

Talk about a great weekend retreat - couldn't have asked for a better outcome!

However -

The reality is that life is not lived in retreat.

We don't fulfil our life's calling all bundled away somewhere in seclusion.

We can't complete God's work in this messy world by remaining in some artificial, pristine location.

You can't go on forever standing on a mountain top gazing at the view. At some point you have to come down from the mountain, and get to work in the fields and villages below.

So the same Holy Spirit that had descended on him along with the affirming voice of the Father in Heaven now points to the wilderness.

It's time for the first big, crucial test.

To shift metaphors, it's like the first test flight of an airplane.

You can leave it in the hanger and on the ground only so long.

At some point you cut loose the safety tie-downs, power up the engines, and aim for the sky.

Hence the desert.

Away from any distractions.

Away from any artificial support mechanisms.

We're into the raw basics of life here.

Here's a picture of typical Judean desert.

Nothing to write home about.



And that's where Jesus lives for 40 days.

Remember, numbers were important in bible days.

40 represented a time of preparation, of testing, of cleansing.

That's what is happening here. A 40 day time of testing.

This event has two Old Testament echos.

They are hinted at by the answers that Jesus gives the Devil during their desert combat. All three come from the book of Deuteronomy (8:3; 6:16; 5:13).

Deuteronomy is the account of Israel's journey through the desert after they have been set free from slavery in Egypt, gone through the Red Sea, and begun the journey to the Promised Land. 1 Corinthians 10:1-2 suggests that this going through the Red Sea was a "baptism" event for Israel. And after the baptism there is the 40 year journey through the wilderness.

Jesus is baptized, and then has a 40 day period in the wilderness.

I've said it before and will say it again – Jesus is presented by Matthew as the New Israel. Everything that God had been working through Israel, all the promises and all the mission and all the prophecy – all of that is taken up in Jesus.

Being God's affirmed first born Son.

Being the One through whom the nations of the world would be blessed.

Being the One through whom the anti-dote to the curse of Sin would be found.

Being the Light in a world of Darkness.

All of that is taken up by Jesus.

God's plan of salvation moves from a nation to a person.

If we want to find the love, the life, the salvation of God
we can find it only in the One who is the New Israel
only in the person of Jesus.

Second echo.

Who wrote Deuteronomy?

Most tradition acknowledges that it came down via oral tradition from Moses. He was the leader of God's people. The voice of God among them. He directed them in God's way.

And out in the desert, after the baptism experience of crossing the Red Sea with the nation, Moses spends 40 days in wilderness conditions, fasting for 40 days and nights, before he receives the Law from God and the call to deliver it to the people.

Know what the first great section of teaching will be from the lips of Jesus – the **very** next chapter of Matthew?

The sermon on the mount.

The great counter-cultural call to Kingdom Living as the New people of God.

He who is the New Israel Himself, will speak the voice of God and call all of us to follow as the New Nation of God through Christ.

So, Jesus is there for forty days.

And the testing begins. When the safety restraints are off, when all the supports are knocked away, how will he respond?

Will he reach out to grab the supports, and fall down if they're not there?

Supports of a comfortable home?

Supports of affirming voices?

Supports of a full stomach?

And, if he falls, will he blame the fall on the lack of supports?

Or, will he take responsibility for his thinking, his choices, and his action?

That seems to be so common today. Have you noticed that?

Lots of people today seem to have a tough time taking responsibility for their thinking, speaking and action.

I wish more of us could be like the first base umpire earlier this week. He said, "Can't blame anyone else. I blew the call. Cost that kid a perfect game. I'm responsible."

Or like some cutting edge thinking that's starting to appear in the LGBT community.

Stephanie Fairington wrote an op ed piece recently in *Dissent* magazine arguing strongly **against** promoting biological determinism as the foundation for living a gay lifestyle – seeing sexuality as predestined and therefore, fixed. In other words, saying, "I was born this way. I have no choice. I can do no other."

She argued against that.

She said, "It has brought us great political advantage. It was powerful for that. But it is, at the end of the day, not healthy."

"We need," she says, "to see homosexual lifestyle and identity as a choice, and we need to take responsibility for making that choice."

There's lots more in the article, but that line leaped out at me as bold and refreshing.

Whether one agrees with her lifestyle or not – she's taking responsibility for it.
I wish more of us could do that!!

Jesus is in the desert for 40 days.
Alone.
No support.
What choices will he make?
Will he take responsibility for them?

So Jesus is challenged.
How?
With innocent, even good things.
Bread is good.
Throwing ourselves into the caring arms of God is good.
Being willing to follow others, and submit to them, can be good.

But when **good** things take on **ultimate** significance they turn ugly.
They become idols.
They displace God as the centre-piece of our lives.
And then they are evil.

How do you know when that happens?
Check your response when they are taken away – how do you think and behave?
Is it in proper measure to the significance that this thing ought to have in your life?
Or is it too big a response?

When our car gets all smashed up, we get frustrated and mad at the senseless waste.
But if we start freaking out – maybe that's a hint it was too important to you.

Bread, and the support of angels can be good.
At the right time and place.
Like, for example, after the trial time.
Jesus is nourished and cared for by angels.
He gets, it seems, both those things.

But not when pushed by the Devil.
Who is trying to make them ultimate things.
Teasing Jesus with what could be good to get him to wander off course, even just a bit. Trying to distract him from the core of his life's calling – as servant of God, as light of the world.
Dangerous lines that pluck the string of his baptism:
"Are you God's Son? If he loved you, he'd feed you, wouldn't he?"
"Are you God's Son? He'll keep you safe, won't he?"
and then finally
"Awe, forget God. Let's try another path to fulfillment."

You know – if I'd read my map, and followed the compass, I'd never have gotten my boat stuck on the rock.
Jesus follows the course with the map and compass of God's Word.
He knows how to rightly handle it.
And charts his life accordingly.

We, of course, are not in the same position of authoritative understanding of God's Word that Jesus was. We might mistake a good saying for an ultimate one, or misread the context or intent of a passage – which the Devil was trying to get Jesus sucked into in verse six.

Jesus had, it seemed, a supernaturally clear grasp of Scripture. He was baffling the religious professors even at the age of 12 when he went to the temple.

We, on the other hand, don't leave people marvelling at our grasp of scripture... not so much :-)
And so it is important that we work on it **together**.

In study.

In worship.

In conversation.

So that we, too, may chart the right course as followers of Jesus.

Friends, scripture tells us that Jesus was tempted in all things, as we are. (Hebrews 4:15)

Yet without sin.

He never wandered off course.

He never caved.

He never allowed a good thing to become an ultimate thing.

He took full responsibility and made all the right choices.

Scripture also tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that "there is no testing or temptation that has overtaken you that is not common to everyone."

Meaning that we, just like the perfect man, like the Son of God and Son of Man, will have the safety supports knocked out from under us at times, too.

And we'll be challenged to make choices and cut life direction at times, too.

And we'll have to be responsible for the choices we make, and what results from them.

1 Corinthians 10 also says, in verse 12, that when we are feeling strong and confident is the very time we are most vulnerable. When our bellies are full. And our needs are met. Or when we've just come off a real spiritual high, off a real affirming time like baptism or profession of faith or a mission experience or a term as elder or deacon.

After the mountain-top moments come the valleys.

Often very soon after.

Brothers and sisters, the devil is continually trying to distract us from the path of service to which we have been commissioned by our baptism. God has a costly but wonderfully glorious vocation for each one of us. The enemy will do everything possible to distract us and thwart God's purpose. If we have heard God's voice welcoming us as his children, we will also hear the whispered suggestions of the enemy.

[N.T. Wright *Matthew For Everyone* p.26]

And know what?

Hard reality tells me that I have caved, and probably will again.

I've made wrong spiritual choices, and probably will again.

I've gotten confused, and know for sure that I will again.

So, friends, I'm so grateful that Jesus won.

That he never caved.

He didn't make wrong choices.

Or became confused.

Yes, thanks be to God that Jesus WON.

That he understands what we face.

And that, as Saviour, he stands fully able and ready and willing to fully cleanse and forgive and renew us so that we can get back up and serve again -

- even after failing a trial.

Because he DIDN'T fail.