

## What Happens When You're Hungry?

### Matthew 4:1-11

Sundays in Lent: God Answers Life's Questions

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. I invite you, during these times of Lent, to get a copy of Thomas a Kempis' book, *The Imitation of Christ*, and as we walk through Lent together, let us reflect on his reflections of who Jesus is. Let us pray together. Now, Almighty God, meet our deepest needs through the life and words of your Son, Jesus. Teach us not to fear the deserted and lonely places where your Spirit leads us. When we think we will be overcome by the terribleness of our state, suddenly break-in and cause your angels to minister to us, lest we perish without experiencing the hope of your loving presence. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

In that spiritual classic by Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, he says, "Whenever a man desires too much above measure, immediately he becomes restless. The avaricious man is never at rest. The man who is not wholly dead-to-self is soon tempted, and is overcome in small and trifling matters; for true peace of heart is to be found in resisting passion, not yielding to it." A Kempis invested his life in following Jesus, even into difficult places, so that he might let go of his own desires and imitate the way and the passion of Jesus.

Lent is a time of choosing to linger in a dry place, an away place. It is a time when we intentionally abstain from things that flood our minds, drive our appetites, and distract us from listening to God. Lent is a time to live more slowly, more simply, more reflectively, and more calmly. Lent is also a time when we may have to confront things that tempt us. When we live without something that is very important to us, we are tempted to pull strings and manipulate systems to fill the void. We are even tempted to sell our souls to the devil to get what we want. What you are tempted to do when you have unmet needs... unmet desires... unmet hungers... or unmet yearnings... is a question you must ask of yourself. What shortcut are you willing to take to get what you want and meet your own need? If it isn't happening for you, what are you willing to do to make it happen? How patient are you? Are you willing to wait for God to meet your longings and fulfill your desires? How much are you tempted to coerce people; feed your ego; fill your bank account; buy intimacy; or grab power? Have you taken the time to look behind the itch or the yearning of your unmet desire to see the battle over your own soul, between good and evil? Are you aware, in the midst of your desperation, that the devil is tempting you and God wants to speak to you? Just to make it clear, I am not one to look for a devil behind every difficult concern of life. I do not want to be taken with, or by, Satan. As one of my seminary theology professors once said, "There are two problems with how we tend to see the devil and evil. One is to deny their existence and refuse to confront them. The other is to become so preoccupied with them that we lose sight of God as the greater power and the better way of life."

Jesus showed us a better way of dealing with the devil, and of dealing with evil. The gospels tell us that the devil occasionally came around to tempt Jesus. But Jesus consistently refused his offerings. The devil left him alone, then, for longer periods of time— always there, ready to find a vulnerability in him. The wilderness, as we see in this text, is a place where the Spirit leads us to go so that we will deal directly with the temptations of the devil. The desert is an arid place where there is not enough to sustain us without the help of God. The spiritual wilderness is a place where we may choose to fast, or we may be forced to fast; where we lose something we want, or give up something we need — in order to confront the darkness of our own souls and in the world. It is a place where we focus on listening to God, remembering what God says, where we seek God with every fiber of our being.

What is there in your life that you desperately want or need? What gnaws at your gut and stirs in your body? What haunts your soul? In the Lenten desert, these are the open hungers that will try to entrap you in temptation. You may hunger for intimacy and be tempted to replace that with sex. You may hunger for

power and be tempted to replace your lack of self-assurance with putting others down. You may hunger for wealth and be tempted to give up your personal integrity in order to defraud other people. You may so hunger for the admiration of your father that you become a workaholic. You may so thirst for recognition that you assuage the need with a loud voice, a dominating opinion, or a pushy disposition. You may so hunger for God that you make gods of the church in membership, or doctrinal views, or even of your pastor (and I make a terrible god.)

You may even make yourself to be god and judge when you have deep need. You may be driven by a shortage of time, or distracted by 'busy-ness,' or noise. You may be irritated by a lack of money or resources. You may be upset by the lack of attention to your needs, or the refusal to side with your opinions. You may be frustrated by the increase in Washington, D.C. traffic. You may be resentful of your body's decline and the aging process. You may grieve the loss of health and your freedom to go out as much as you've done before. Going into the wilderness is about facing loss and choosing less. The devil looks extremely good when God leads us to give up things that we want and love.

After Jesus was baptized, a strange thing happened to him. Just at the moment when we would think he was ready to go out into the world to accomplish his mission, he was suddenly led into the wilderness, by the Spirit, to be tempted by the devil. Now let us not get that confused: the Spirit led him into the wilderness; the devil tempted him. Have you ever thought this sequence of events to be a bit curious? Jesus was the greatest leader who ever lived; and the trip into wilderness was a crucial stage in his preparation to be a leader. Without this seeming side-journey into the desert, Jesus would not have been ready to be the leader that God wanted him to be.

Why is the wilderness so important to our discipleship maturity and to our leadership development? There can be no shortcut from the affirmation of our identity and gifts, to the empowerment of our mission. In between our baptism to discipleship and our call to leadership, there is a necessary "trying stage;" a kind of survival wilderness training; a raw course, during which there must be rigorous reckoning with ourselves... a struggling encounter with God... and a wrenching confrontation with the devil. As Moses and the people of God discovered, there is no straight line to travel between Egypt and the Promised Land. If we're going to be transformed by the Spirit of God on the way, while we undertake the journey, there is only one way to go— and it is the roundabout way; the tough road of dust and mud; steep shoulders, ruts, holes, and bumps. It's an unmarked path through the wilderness. We aren't ready to lead until we've been led by the Spirit to go into that wilderness and face our temptations. If we go into leadership and mission before we face and overcome our temptations, when we find ourselves in leadership, the surprises of hard times, with their temptations, can undercut our viability to accomplish the mission in life God has given to us.

Too many people are placed in leadership roles before they've confronted the core of their personal temptations. Upon our baptism into God's loving presence and family and his empowerment through his Spirit, we gain a core identity of being loved by God, and an affirmation of our gifts for ministry. But we are still lacking a crucial dimension of ministry preparation: we still lack walking through the crucible of facing our vulnerability in the face of evil. While we may have the love of God, feel his gracious presence, receive God's gifts to do service, and are filled with the power of God's Spirit, we still lack one very important facet of leadership. We lack the maturity, wisdom, and power gained from knowing our vulnerabilities... facing our flaws of character... and saying "No" to the devil.

When our needs are not being met, when our desires go unrequited, our hungers tempt us to take shortcuts to get what we want, when we want it. If Jesus had to go into the wilderness to face the devil, how much more do we need to allow the Spirit to lead us into that desert place— to learn to trust God in the face of seduction, and to say "No" to the devil? Baptism— knowing that we are loved by God, called, given charisma and giftedness— these are insufficient to meet the full demands of leadership. Charisma without character is a calamity waiting to happen. The call to service—ventured without going through the crucible of the desert, the devil, and temptation— is a cul-de-sac to nowhere, not a pathway to mission accomplished. Too many talented leaders collapse in their sudden success, or their meteoric rise to public acclaim. They never had a chance to deal with their dark side —having ignored, avoided, or discounted the Spirit's leading to go into a desert place so that they might face what evil might evoke from them. They have not been told they must anticipate those times of being too full of themselves... not full of the Spirit...

and vulnerable to temptation.

Andrew Greeley, a Catholic priest and a professor of sociology, writes novels about church leaders who struggle with their ambition and temptation. In his book, *Ascent Into Hell*, he tells the story of a man who suppresses God's call on his life, to become a commodities trader in Chicago. The more successful, powerful, and wealthy he becomes, the more his life becomes a living hell. In his self-centered drive to the top, he begins to lose himself, lose his wife and friends, and his church. He finds himself in a lonely place of desolation, for he finally must face the darkness in his own soul. He sees that he has given-in to the temptations of the devil, and in fact, is on the verge of losing his soul. Greeley's point is clear: The pursuit of success without the challenge to charisma, without the facing of temptation during tough times, may leave one deluged with cash... but destitute of character.

Henri Nouwen, the famous Catholic writer on the spiritual life and Christ, was invited to Washington, D.C., several years ago to speak on Christian leadership in the 21st century. Anchoring his D.C. lectures on this text in Matthew, chapter four, he later wrote a book based upon these D.C. lectures called, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. As he appeared in D.C., Nouwen embodied the incarnate example of the topic that he had been asked to address. He had moved from being a professor of pastoral psychology, pastoral theology, and Christian spirituality at great institutions like Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard, and had moved recently to a handicapped community called L'Arche Daybreak in Toronto, Canada. In his own words, Nouwen said, "I moved from Harvard to L'Arche; from the best and the brightest, wanting to rule the world... to men and women who had few, or no words, and were considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society. It was a very hard and painful move— like going into the desert."

But he believed that this move taught him about the nature of leadership needed for the 21st century: servant leadership, nurtured in the cauldron of the desert experience; willing to give up addictions to relevance, popularity, and power. And he said these are not vocations, these are temptations. Instead, he said, leaders need to move from the temptation of relevance, to the spiritual discipline of prayer; from popularity, to the discipline of service; from leading, to the discipline of being led. I believe the American pattern of leadership recognition, affirmation and confirmation, tends to major on good looks... fast minds... right schools... hard ambition... driven passion... giftedness... charisma... education... and success. But there is little expectation to track proven character in the face of wilderness experience. There are few who are challenged to demonstrate how they have learned to say "No" to the devil and grow in depth during difficult times.

Christian discipleship, as leadership preparation, must include time in the wilderness, including the practice of saying "No" to the devil. No one should be called to leadership who has the gifts but has not experienced the grief of giving up; letting go; giving away; going through hard times; being destitute; facing failure; failing the trial of temptation; or weathering the storms of conflict. Having gone through the crucible of confrontation, with the power of God's Spirit, they can emerge on the other side of the wilderness as tempered steel and purified gold. They are then ready to lead. Too many successful men and women are promoted into position, power, and privilege, without coming to grips with their dark sides. And we see the troubling evidence every day, in the news, of what happens when leaders take spiritual or emotional shortcuts. There are too many gifted and talented people who ascend quickly but fall into temptation to lose credibility and trust. Jesus did not go that way. The Spirit did not lead him into instant public success. And even when he did attract great crowds, he chose to turn away from those crowds and set his face toward Jerusalem, where he knew he would have to die.

And so we are called, as disciples and leaders, to go the way of Jesus— through the wilderness, to be tempted by the devil— before going into mission and leadership. Jesus calls us to detach from the things that make us look good and attach ourselves to the presence of God, who helps us become good. Whether we are forced to fast, or we choose to fast, coming to grips with our desires and our hungers drives us to a place where we must confront those things that will tempt us. And we must find the strength of God to overcome the temptation; or the humility of God to admit that we've succumbed to temptation. I have heard this story all too often: a gifted young man, particularly (in some cases young woman), becomes the senior pastor of a dynamic church. He wows people with his preaching and presence. But we hear, after a few years, that his marriage has dissolved; his children are alienated; the congregation has jettisoned him;

and everyone wonders what went wrong.

I think we have a misguided understanding of the nature of leadership, from the start. Too many successful young leaders are protected from going into an awareness of their dark sides. They are not permitted to venture into the wilderness to face the devil. At a young age, they are already promoted to significant positions of leadership because of gifts and charisma. With the pressure of responsibility and the lack of maturity, the young succumb to the disorientation of wilderness moments and the unanticipated seductions of money, sex, and power. And if they don't deal with it when they're young, they will deal with it at mid-life.

There is an important difference between temptation and sin. Temptation is the marketing plan, and sin is the signing of the contract to close the deal and collect on the proceeds. Three times Jesus was offered deals by the devil. These were deals that made some sense for the doing of his mission. The devil often attacks us and tempts us at the very points of our call and our strengths. He was hungry, and he had the power to make bread. After all, later he would turn water into wine; and he would multiply a few loaves of bread and a few fish to feed thousands of people. Part of Jesus' mission was to feed others— but not on his agenda— on God's agenda. He was to meet the hungers of humanity, while God himself would meet Jesus' needs.

Again in the second temptation, he was to show himself to be the Son of God. He was to offer himself to die in Jerusalem— but not on the devil's terms— not by calling attention to his spectacular powers of throwing himself off the top of the temple so that angels would protect him. He needed to die a quiet, seemingly insignificant death of a criminal, not a spectacular public show of heavenly and angelic intervention. In the third temptation, he was to become King of kings and Lord of lords — but not on the plan of the devil; not in subordination to what the devil wanted. He would need to be the suffering servant, and then God would make him the emperor of all nations. He would not set himself up as a ruler of the world according to evil, or evil's pattern and authority; he would do it according to God's word.

You cannot say “No” to the devil on your own. You can only say “No” to the devil if you are full of the Holy Spirit and in the presence of Almighty God, knowing God's word. Jesus is our ultimate model of facing temptation and not being seduced. As we are willing to learn the discipleship of Jesus, to walk with him, to grow in character and maturity, we will grow in the grace of Christ to face temptation. If we try to face the devil on our own, without the preparation of Jesus and the filling of his Spirit, we will not be able to overcome the evil that is put in front of us.

Now, none of us here can ever say that we have overcome all temptations and that we are without sin, like Jesus did. God's word is clear on this: all of us have succumbed to temptation, and all of us have sinned. Jesus has gone into the wilderness before us; this is the good news. Jesus stands with us in our temptation, and our sin, to confront us, call us to repent, to forgive us, and to teach us how to do better next time. For the committed disciple of Jesus— for the called leader of God— there is no superhighway bypass around the desert. We are led to off-road action, driven there by the Holy Spirit. There is no map, but there is a survivors' journal called the Bible. And there is the ever-present God, our relationship with Jesus, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

As Thomas a Kempis also said, “When a man who fears God is afflicted, or tried, or pressed with evil thoughts, then he sees that God is all the more necessary to him, since without God he can do no good thing. Then he is heavy-of-heart; he groans, he cries out for the disquietedness of his own heart. And by all this he is taught that, in the world, there can be no perfect security or fullness of peace; but he is driven to be in the presence of God, in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Spirit.”

Our deepest hunger is not satisfied by bread, but by God— by every word that God has spoken to us in Jesus. The word of God in the New Testament book of Hebrews summarizes the key to the help that we find in Christ: “Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who, in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in the time of need.” That's the solution to the hunger in the wilderness.

Let us pray. Almighty God, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Spirit that fills us to be able to live in the wilderness, we ask that you minister to us now, that might know the Good News of being with Jesus, even when the devil confronts us. We ask that you would forgive us our temptations and our sins, and that you would lead us in growing ways into paths of righteousness, for your name's sake. Amen.