



ANTI-ADDICTION DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Matthew 4:1-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. (v. 2) He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. (v. 3) The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." (v. 4) But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (v. 5) Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, (v. 6) saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" (v. 7) Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (v. 8) Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; (v. 9) and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." (v. 10) Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" (v. 11) Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

Addiction is an illness that manifests as a compulsive, chronic, physical and psychological dependence on, or deep craving for, a substance (e.g., alcohol, drugs, tobacco) or behavioral practice (over-eating, gambling, sex, watching pornography) beyond voluntary control, with psychosocial, environmental, genetic factors. Dependence becomes habitual, often causing one to lose control and engage in more intense addictive behavior, despite that the abuse of substances or practicing such behaviors can jeopardize one's total health and socio-economic well-being, producing harm, even death. Such prolonged behavior can alter one's personality, nervous system, and brain functions.

Anti-Addiction is a commitment to honor the body's sacredness, embrace life one day at a time, and be mindful of our strengths, propensities, and weaknesses, particularly things over which we are powerless, and that we must commit to God's leading towards transformation, peace, and well-being. Anti-Addiction work is a process where one grows daily, without perfection, blame, or judgment. This process involves one's entire life, lived in the present, as a spiritual endeavor. Many have found participation in Twelve Step programs (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, Ala-non (for friends and families of alcoholics), Overeaters Anonymous, etc.) in concert with their daily faith walk as an opportunity to find acceptance, strength, and hope, towards transformation and a healthier life.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 4:1-11

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

From colonial times until recently the so-called "American Dream," where anything is possible with the "right pedigree," sweat equity, and solid networking, was a given in the U.S.A. Today, with the impending bailout of Wall Street mergers, buyouts, bankruptcies, and hundreds of thousands of Main Street foreclosures, and the class, race, and gender divides which have precluded many from its reach, the dream has collapsed. Major stress arises in pursuing such dreams and around the disappointments when such dreams implode. Desire and greed lead to the temptation to live beyond our financial means producing inordinate debt, foreclosures, and buyouts. Such stress often leaves one overwhelmed, empty, lonely, tired, angry, and depressed. When things are inaccessible, or not as satisfying as we had imagined, we often experience a huge void. This void is an incubator, a catalyst for addiction. Marketers recognize this deep need, they pander to it, particularly to African Americans when it comes to menthol cigarettes, sweet alcoholic drinks, and greasy unhealthy fast foods.

As are most professional women, particularly black women, I am a multi tasker. On any given day, I wear many different hats, from professor to preacher, counselor, and mentor. Living in such a context, one can easily become disembodied by becoming a workaholic, not getting enough rest, and trying to be a Superwoman. The busier we are, the more tempted we are to short-change ourselves and to fall into addictive patterns and habits. Independently and separately, such habits might seem harmless. However, collectively they can become problematic and, in some cases, deadly.

Such temptation abounds in life and, the closer walk we have with God, the more aware we are of it. Reading Matthew 4 cognizant of twenty-first century temptations that result in higher rates

of diabetes, alcoholism, drug addiction, cancer, and debt in African American communities, can provide an impetus for heightening communal consciousness about such diseases and about hope that abounds in Christ.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Biblical scholar, M. Eugene Boring, reminds us that the underlying tension in the Gospel of Matthew is God vs. Satan, hidden actor against hidden opponent, where the latter only appears once as a character in the story line.²

The word Satan, one of the terms that has evolved to mean personified or personalized command or power of evil, had evolved by the time of New Testament writings to become a proper noun for someone, perhaps a fallen angel, who resisted and continues to rebel against God's rule by tempting human beings to do wrong. Having been baptized in Galilee, Jesus is led by the Spirit to the wilderness to be tempted. The wilderness can be a place of desolation or of renewal; a place where one is hopelessly lost, and/or where one comes to God and sees him or herself.

Temptation is a major theological theme in this text. The passage maps out how Jesus deals with temptation following a period of fasting for forty days and forty nights. Not only does this time echo the season of Lent, it reminds us of an opportunity to fast and pray for clarity about those people, places, and things that press us toward temptation. While Jesus is hungry he does not yield to temptation, which reminds us that we can be tempted and not succumb. As we come to believe that we are powerless over substances and behaviors, we can let go and let God rule and be the center of our lives and not engage in addictive behavior as a coping mechanism.

Intriguingly, in verse 3, Satan argues with Jesus to determine what it means that he is Son of God, not whether or not he is Son of God. If Jesus experienced temptation, so will we. When tempted, Jesus quoted scripture; and only the third time does he add words other than from Deuteronomy when he says, "Away with you, Satan!" (v. 10) Thus, scripture is a resource of empowerment, not a sacred text to be worshiped, one to be read and meditated over so that God can help mute and transform addictions and feed us spiritually. For some who experience addiction, medicine, therapy, and twelve-step programs or support groups are also essential. Just as Jesus had no shame at this experience of temptation, we need have no shame or guilt about trying to overcome the temptation of addiction.

Boring notes that scholars have interpreted Jesus' encounter with Satan in three ways: (1) biographical/psychological, which focuses on Jesus' internal struggles after baptism, which Boring suggests violates the text; (2) ethical reading, which views Jesus as a paradigm for defying temptation, though this text really is not a simple move from Jesus as model to our own struggles with temptation, given that the temptations in the text pertain to things normally viewed as good; and, (3) Christological, which reflects how believers in Matthew's church and the church today ought to think of Jesus, as Messiah, as Son of God.³ Taking Boring's lead, I see this text as God calling us to think of ourselves as children of God, made anew through Christ Jesus. As such, we can rely on our relationship with Christ and a dedicated daily spiritual life to help us embrace those beliefs and practices that will "deliver us from temptation."

Awareness and recognition of temptations to ourselves and our communities can emerge as we recognize the challenge to our spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical well-being. This is the first step. Active addictions imprison and devastate our vibrancy and the Spirit of God within us, while juxtaposing our carnal desires over and against our spiritual aspirations. We can thus read this text as an opportunity to not be judgmental, afraid, overwhelmed, or stressed by the principalities and powers that come to distract us from our purpose on earth: the call God has on our lives. Thus, we do not need to be surprised or derailed when we meet carnal and spiritual challenges, since Satan even tried to tempt Jesus during his sojourn in the wilderness. We can be prepared by building and strengthening our spirituality muscles and having prayer partners, spiritual directors, and support groups who can assist us during moments, even seasons of temptation.

Celebration

This text teaches us to celebrate the power of embodying the gift of being children of God, realizing a spiritual life that daily prepares us to recognize temptation and having the tools that will allow us to see and transcend them, before they morph into addictions. We are not our temptations, addictions, or our circumstances. Like Jesus, we too can stand on high mountains, see the world's so-called splendor and avoid bowing to temptation as we embrace healthy ways of living.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The tempter's voice (v. 3); addicts snorting drugs; alcoholics vomiting after a hang-over; parents pleading with children to end addictive behavior; children pleading with parents to end addictive behavior; the sound of police sirens enroute to arrest a person engaged in illegal additive behavior;

Sights: Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness (v. 1); a sandy desert-like wilderness (v. 1); Jesus famished/hungry (v. 2); loaves of bread and stones (v.3); the pinnacle of the temple (v. 5); angels bearing up Jesus on their hands to avoid him dashing his feet against a stone (v. 6); a very high mountain (v. 8); all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor (v. 8); the devil leaving Jesus.

This moment on the calendar also evokes images of persons engaging in addiction and the results including: persons using methamphetamine; families hiding items in homes to avoid having them stolen by addicted children; families rescuing relatives who overdose; persons being thrown out of homes for failure to pay bills due to all funds being used to buy drugs; alcoholic parents battering children; alcoholic men battering women; codependent relatives accepting addicts and their negative behavior again and again; the testimonies of those who have overcome alcohol, drugs, eating addictions and other addictions; and

Textures: Stones of different shapes, sizes, and surfaces (v. 3).

III. Quotes Applicable to this Moment on the Calendar

- Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.⁴
-- Marianne Williamson
- Temptation is the fire that brings up the scum of the heart.
-- William Shakespeare
- When I am able to resist the temptation to judge others, I can see them as teachers of forgiveness in my life, reminding me that I can only have peace of mind when I forgive rather than judge.⁵
--Gerald Jampolsky
- Just 'cause you got the monkey off your back doesn't mean the circus has left town.
--George Carlin, U.S. actor and comedian

Notes

1. For further information, consult Alcoholics Anonymous online location: <http://www.aa.org/?Media=PlayFlash> accessed 1 October 2008; and Trevor Hudson's One Day at a Time: Discovering the Freedom of 12-Step Spirituality. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2007, provides tools for facing temptations and struggles to reclaim self-worth and renewal.
2. Boring, M. Eugene. "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. VIII. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995. pp. 162-163
3. Ibid., p. 162.
4. Williamson, Marianne. A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1992. pp. 190-191
5. Jampolsky, Gerald and Patricia Hopkins. Good-Bye to Guilt: Releasing Fear Through Forgiveness. New York, NY: Bantam Dell Books, 1985. p. 38