

LENT I, YEAR A

26 February 2023

Matthew 4:1-11

As I've been listening to the news in recent weeks, a topic that I seem to be hearing a lot about recently ChatGPT. If you haven't heard about this new technology before, it is an AI chatbot. ChatGPT uses artificial intelligence for applications such as creating original writings. Based on the parameters that you enter, the chatbot can produce a quality piece of work.

This has a lot of fun uses. For example, my oldest son, who is five, is into telling jokes at the moment. I could, therefore, ask the chatbot to produce knock-knock jokes for me. Or, if I'm interested in whether or not a book is any good, I could ask the chatbot to draft a page-long summary of the novel.

The artificial intelligence produces such high-quality writings that use of ChatGPT has become cause for concern in academic communities. Post-secondary institutions are worried that students are going to start submitting papers that they did not actually write; apparently, it's very difficult to detect whether a student or a chatbot authored a work. For example, I could submit a 1500-word book report on *The Great Gatsby*, or a complete dissertation on Bauhaus art, and it would be unclear to those reading these pieces whether I had actually written them, or if I had used a bot. In fact, some schools are investing in technologies designed to detect inauthentic work. Apart from those programs, how could one tell if an assignment was written by a student? How would you know if I wrote this sermon today? Hopefully, you're not sitting here wondering about this, but the fact is that a bot is capable of writing a 10-minute long homily on Matthew chapter 4. And so, the topic of integrity, the integrity of the voice of the author, is very much a live conversation in our society at present.

The integrity of the voice of the author is what we ought to be attentive to in our lessons this morning; in both Genesis 3 and Matthew 4, respectively. Adam and Eve, as you know, were tempted. Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to fast for forty days and forty nights, and he too is tempted.

Perhaps temptation has been on your mind since Wednesday, if you are engaged in a Lenten practice where you have given something up. Maybe you gave up red meat, or sweets, or coffee, or alcohol; we think of temptation as being drawn to consume any of these things, particularly if we have chosen to set them aside for this season. While all those things are tempting, the kind of temptation that we're talking about in our readings this morning is being tempted away from God. It's relational. Temptation, when succumbed to, results in a fractured relationship with God. So, when the serpent says to Adam and Eve, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Genesis 3:1b NRSV), he's asking them to question the integrity of the Word of God that has been given to them.

Similarly, in Matthew, Jesus is tempted in three ways. The devil says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread," (Matthew 4:3 NRSV). Again, this is questioning the very Word of God Almighty, given, not just to Jesus, but the entire community that surrounded him. For we know in his baptism, an audible voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," (Matthew 3:17). So the devil's use of that little word, "if": "if you are the Son of God", is a questioning of the integrity of the Word of God.

Of course, Jesus because he's fasting, is very hungry. Matthew tells us that our Lord is famished (Matthew 4:2). Just because Jesus is the Son of God does not negate his humanity in any way. He felt hunger, just like you and I feel hunger. The words of the devil tempt Jesus to eat when he has committed to fast.

A third aspect of this temptation, in addition to eroding the integrity of the Word of God and tempting Jesus to eat when he's committed to fasting, is actually something that we say a lot to God: there are a lot of hungry people in our world, so why not turn these stones into bread? Why not make more food? If there are people in our world who are starving, then why isn't God doing something about that? I don't know if you've ever been asked this question by a friend who is exploring their own faith: "If your God is so loving, why does he let people suffer starvation?" This temptation risks our eroding our understanding of who God is. Because there is enough food in this world for everyone. We are just not very good at sharing it. Accusing God of not having created enough is accusing God of not being who he says he is: I AM; I AM enough. All aspects of this temptation are an attempt to fracture the perfect communion of Father and Son.

Now in the second temptation, the tempter sets Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple and says, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you'..." (Matthew 4:6). This is a direct quotation of Psalm 91 (Psalm 91:11-12). If you were to take a moment now to flip to this psalm in your Bible, you would see these exact words printed there. The devil tries to tempt Jesus, in Jesus' weakness, by misappropriating the words of Scripture. Unfortunately, this is something that probably all of us have had happened to us, and maybe have done in error ourselves: we pluck something out of the Bible, out of its context, and say, "It says it in Scripture, therefore...my point is proved." Well maybe it's not actually the point of the text. And even if you haven't had this experience with Bible verses being used out of context, I'm sure that we've all had the experience of someone relaying something that we've said in a way that really twists our meaning. It's not a nice feeling; we feel as though we have been misunderstood and misrepresented.

Jesus understands the context of Psalm 91, and in fact, the complete testimony of Scripture. This shapes his response to the temptation: "Again it is written: Do not put the Lord your God to the test," (Matthew 4:7; cf. Deuteronomy 6:16 NRSV). Jesus recognizes that Scripture has been deployed in this temptation in a way that does not represent of the voice of the one who has spoken it.

In the third temptation recorded in Matthew 4, the devil takes Jesus up to a high mountain to show him all the kingdoms of the world, and says, "All these I will give you if you fall down and worship me," (Matthew 4:9). Speaking about things being taken out of context, I don't know if you've ever saw this on your social media feed or elsewhere, but there was a meme going around a while ago of this exact verse quoted: "All this shall be yours if you bow down and worship me," credited to the Bible. Of course, at first glance you read this and think, "Okay, if I bow down and worship God, I will receive all the kingdoms of the world." But then if you read the text in its context, that is this chapter of Matthew, it's the devil who says it and not God. This example speaks to how important it is that we understand the context of what we're reading.

This temptation lays before Jesus this opportunity to be a powerful person in the world, if he would just stray from God's plan for a moment; if he would just bow down and worship another other than the Lord God. We know where obeying the will of the Lord is going to lead Jesus. It will not lead him to being the king of over worldly kingdoms. It will lead to death. But by his death and resurrection he is the one ever proclaimed as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. There is more than worldly glory at stake here; there is greater will at work here, towards a more perfect plan.

When these temptations conclude, and the devil departs from Jesus, God's angels do attend him. The Son is cared for by the Father, as we know the closeness of God in our weakness. It is the word of God that keeps Jesus safe from temptation in his weakness.

It is incumbent upon us to allow God to keep us safe by his word, by our getting to know the Word of God. When we are tempted away from our communion with Him by things that cut at the core of our identity, or by our 'wants', understanding who God is by his word made know to us, this is how He keeps our souls safe.

As I said in the announcements, there are many opportunities to grow in our knowledge and love of God, and of his word. My charge for today is not simply read the Bible, although we should. I acknowledge that immersing oneself in God's word might look different for each. If you have committed to a Lenten practice of study, I invite you to be encouraged in that, by studying with another or as a group on Monday nights. If you want to know the Bible better, but you're not a reader, try listening to it. But do get to know God's word; He does keep us safe by it.

If you haven't yet decided what you Lenten practise will be, perhaps this is a good place to start. Seek to understanding God's word a little better. He will be faithful to you in your offering. Amen.