

EPIPHANY 2 - JANUARY 15, 2023

Matthew 4:1-17

The Mediterranean world lives by a deeply rooted belief in spirits who exist in numbers too huge to count and whose major pastime is interfering capriciously in daily human life. Contemporary Mediterranean cultures, like the Italian or Spanish, rely upon a broad range of amulets, formulas, or other symbols to ward off attacks from spirits.

Blue is a favourite colour believed to be an especially powerful protection against spirits. People paint their window frames and door jambs blue or wear blue ribbons or clothes precisely for this reason. Others prefer red or scarlet, or wear specific medals, charms, or amulets that are guaranteed to impede attacks.

When the voice from heaven identified Jesus at his baptism as “my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,” all the spirits heard this compliment. Every Mediterranean native knows what must and will happen next. Spirits will test Jesus to determine whether the compliment is indeed true, and just in case it might be true they will try to make him do something displeasing to God.

It is no surprise, then, that the very next scene Matthew presents is “the temptation.” Temptation, sin, and evil! They are bigger than we are. And so Jesus encountered temptations bigger than he was, in the form of the devil. It’s interesting that Jesus endured temptations at the

start of his ministry. Is that not when temptations often come to us - when we are just beginning or contemplating the beginning of new phases in our lives? And quite often those temptations meet us in the depth of our being.

Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. He was led by a good spirit into the wilderness, the normal habitat of spirits, where he did battle with an evil spirit, the devil. What is surprising in Matthew's narrative is that Jesus is not reported to be wearing blue garments or using an amulet or even special formulas for protection. Rather, he engages in direct, one-on-one dialogue with this evil spirit in a Scripture-quoting contest.

Three times Jesus is tempted to do something that would make him a displeasing son. Three times Jesus replies by quoting from Scripture to overcome the temptation. The devil also quotes Scripture to Jesus but still does not succeed in tripping him up. Jesus wins the contest, and the devil leaves. The temptation story is based upon and carefully crafted after the pattern of Israel's temptations in the desert during its Exodus from Egypt. Matthew arranged the temptations differently from Luke, ending with the high mountain as the scene of the final temptation. Mountains are important symbols in Matthew. They identify places of revelation, places where the Father of the Son gives teaching to human beings.

Clearly, the story of Jesus' victory over the devil is not intended by

Matthew as a model for baptized Christians who also have to battle against evil spirits. No Christian possesses the powers that Jesus is here tempted to misuse.

Matthew's purpose in this story is to present Jesus as the faithful and obedient Son of God, just as he was presented in the baptism story. The implied contrast of the obedient son, Jesus, with the disobedient son, Israel in the exodus story is deliberate.

Those among Matthew's first readers who asked: "Why should I believe in Jesus?" were given culturally appropriate answers. Jesus is a model of obedience to God. He emerges victorious from his combat with the devil. He can safeguard and maintain his honour and avoid shame. Until his arrest, trial, and death, no one – human or spirit – succeeds in shaming him, tripping him up, or causing him to fall from his stated position and goals. This is the consequence of unflinching obedience to God.

We, generally, do not believe that spirits cause us any problems. This cultural conviction is what made the comedian Flip Wilson's character, Geraldine, so amusing every time she resorted to her favourite excuse: "The devil made me do it!"

But we do understand power. We especially understand and resent the abuse of power by those who should wield it for the benefit of others.

Scholars point out that in the Gospels Jesus wields no power at all except in regard to spirits and demons. The story of Jesus' refusal to abuse the power he possessed offers us something very relevant to ponder.

Most of us have been duped into thinking of Satan, the devil, Beelzebub, the spirit of evil in the world, as a comic-strip or cartoon character, to be taken lightly, to be laughed at – a ridiculous superstition out of an old and primitive time.

This may be evil's greatest achievement – persuading us to believe that evil as a real entity does not exist, and that our shiny, modern, intellectual, sophisticated world will no longer fall for this old prince of darkness with the pitchfork, horns, and flaming eyes.

But the witness of God's word is insistent, that there is an evil force – maybe not with a pitchfork, pointy tail, and flaming eyes. But somewhere out there an evil force does exist – whatever we call it, call him, call her. Almost daily we are put to the test. Evil in the world is as real today as it was at the start of the human adventure. It may not exist in the form it did for our Middle Eastern ancestors. It may not be repelled or controlled by blue clothing or amulets, but evil – temptation – or testing our faith – comes to all of us, just as it came to Jesus, true God and yet truly human and vulnerable.

Matthew's story of Jesus' temptations at the start of his ministry is not to be taken as a literal eyewitness account. It is to be seen as a spiritual portrayal of the confrontation of Christ by the forces of evil in his world that he had been sent to overcome. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Matthew describes, in a most dramatic way, the kinds of testing Jesus faced throughout his days on earth, the testing that we have fallen heir to.

Matthew's account, and Luke's shorter version, state quite clearly that evil is an actual and powerful reality in the world. The stories show the listeners and us how evil works in the hidden corners of our hearts and minds in our day-by-day lives.

The testing comes to us just as it came to Jesus, through our senses, our appetites, our natural desires. Jesus had gone without food; only now and again a sip of water from a nearby stream. He was hungry, desperately hungry, and consequently most vulnerable at the point of his physical appetite. The temptation – the testing spirit tried to lure him to use his God-given powers for the satisfaction of his earthly hunger. Basically the proposition was this: Remain true to God and suffer the bitter pangs of hunger, or disobey God, do the devil's bidding: take the easy way out, satisfy yourself, satisfy your hunger.

Jesus has been called Messiah and Emmanuel by Matthew's storyteller. These titles give him the task of turning the world right-side-

up. Plumbers and pediatricians need to pass stringent tests before we allow them to carry out their tasks, so it's no surprise that the Messiah would also be tested. You don't turn just anyone loose on the world to hold a position of trust without first being sure they were up to the job.

With that in mind, the specific tests given Jesus are well-suited to test the fibre of a Messiah. They test for ability to balance the two aspects of human beings that are most often out of whack: aspiration and appetite. In Genesis, the rabbis note a similar test. Havvah (Eve) overreaches and aspires to "be like God." Mudguy (Adam) only reaches for food without even noticing what it actually is. The Messiah is given a chance to ease his hunger. After forty days of fasting, he is hungry. But the Messiah has self-control and refuses to break his fast. He remembers who he is and whose he is.

Young Miriam was approaching her bat mitzvah. She was experimenting with how (and whether) she wanted to be Jewish – as she approached this decisive day of taking on the discipline of torah observance. One day she asked what was wrong with pepperoni pizza. She had tasted it at sleep-overs with friends, and had liked it very much. "If God created the earth and every creature on it," she argued, "what could be wrong with enjoying the taste of the pork that goes into the pepperoni?" Probably she expected her father to issue a prohibition and provoke the sort of fight that adolescents so often pick and imagine that they win. Instead, he responded with a challenge: "You will have to

decide,” he said. Then he held his breath.

After a relentless round of sleep-overs and birthday parties, Miriam announced her decision. “There is nothing wrong with pepperoni pizza,” she declared. “God made it, and there is nothing wrong with it.” Parental nervousness began to boil. But she continued: “There is nothing wrong with pepperoni, but there is a lot that is right with learning self-control. When I smell pepperoni, I will remember that I am a Jew and that I know how to control myself.” Jesus is being given the same sort of test, and they both pass.

Whether we “believe the devil” or not, we know by now that one of the areas of our greatest vulnerability is our earthy, sensual appetite and desire. With us as with Jesus, the issue is “Me or God?” On the one hand, the word of God declares, “I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.” But on the other hand, the enticing voice whispers, “Enjoy yourself, it’s later than you think. Life is short, just do it.” On the one hand, God’s word is pretty explicit, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” On the other hand, the testing spirit among us and within us holds an index finger to the sky and cries, “Number one! Look out for number one!” With us, as with Jesus, the luring voice offers the same alternatives: “Satisfy yourself and enjoy! Or follow God’s way and go without; sacrifice the superficial joys of life.”

Every day of our lives we are tested in some way or other. For us,

as for Jesus, it can come in various ways. Sometimes the testing comes to us through our doubts and fears. Jesus was mysteriously, as in a nightmare, carried high upon the pinnacle of the temple. In his humanity, mortal fear for his very life swept over him. And the testing spirit came: “What are you afraid of? If God is God, if God keeps promises, nothing can harm you. If you really believe, God will give you a soft landing.”

Basically the test was this: Trust God and believe God’s word in spite of the fear and trembling, or call God’s bluff and let him prove himself. This old test is put on us over and over again. Whenever we cry out in the midst of some spiritual anguish or physical cross-bearing: “If God cares” or “Why does God do this?” Whenever the human spirit trembles in frightened denial of the goodness and mercy of an everlasting God, it is a sure sign that the testing spirit of evil has been slinking about, prodding and poking and challenging the truth of God’s existence and word. The testing spirit does not understand and does its utmost to see what we will not. God’s mercy and grace are most consistently proved through faith, never through unbelief. As Christ’s followers we need to guard against the temptation to say, “If God loves me, God will do this or that for me.” Instead, we need to say, “God loves me and will do what is right.”

We are tested by the desires of the flesh and our carnal appetites. We are tested in times of life’s extremes, when God’s presence and love seem very far away. And just as Jesus was, we too are tested through

our human ambition. The testing for Jesus came high on one of the holy mountains, where all the world seemed visible before and beneath him. There the Son of God, was offered a shortcut to the very prize he had been born to receive. “You came to bring the kingdom, to rule in human hearts, to have yourself and your works made known in the uttermost parts of the earth. See how easy it is. All you have to do is shift your allegiance from God to the godlessness of the world.”

Basically the question was this: Does it matter how you achieve God’s will for your life? Does it matter what methods you use to realize your ambition? What is more important – the way you live or what you end up with?

In much the same way, we are tested by the evil, grasping, greedy spirit that is a constant in our world. We are repeatedly led to magnify the end and ignore the means by which it is achieved. We are hypnotized by our vision of the crown and the throne – the power and the glory – until they become so important that we seek to gain them without regard for anyone else and with utter disdain for God’s word.

If the end can apparently be readily achieved through a little dishonesty and double-dealing, under the influence of evil, we wend our way along a crooked path of self-centeredness and malicious disregard and lack of compassion for others – that finally leads to destruction. And, as the testing times and moments of failing come and go, we forget that

we ever heard God's call to walk the path of righteousness for his name's sake.

The testing time and place is 'always' and 'everywhere'. What shall we do? To whom shall we go? Jesus, in his testing time gives the answer. The word of God, the way of God, the truth of God is our only reliable defence. Tempted by our appetites, we hear God's reply: Humankind shall not live by bread alone but by the word of God.

Tested by fear and trembling doubt, we hear Jesus' reply: "Into your hands, O Father, I commend my spirit – perfect love casts out fear." Tested by our own ambitious seeking of the kingdoms of the world, we hear Jesus' command, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Amen.