

Temptations

Matthew 4:1-11

We live in an era of “fake news.” The democratic debates and the president’s speeches are almost instantly fact checked, though the bias of the fact checkers often shows through. Even websites like Snopes that are dedicated to debunking fake news are under scrutiny for how they fact check.

The problem with fake news is that it makes us question everything so that we believe nothing. As the saying goes, “if you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.”

Let’s take this example. As I was thinking about this idea, I thought about the quote, “A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.” I thought I remembered it being attributed to Mark Twain. The first Google result, though, was from when Colin Kaepernick tweeted out the quote, citing Winston Churchill. Digging a little deeper, it seems as though neither Churchill or Twain were the first to use it, and Churchill might not have said it at all.

How do you figure out if something is fake news? How do you know what’s true? Evaluating those claims involves asking more questions and digging a little deeper. Who wrote the information? What’s the source of a claim? Does the author have an agenda?

The biggest problem with fake news is that it makes us doubt real news. When we start to doubt more and more, it’s harder and harder for us to trust anything or anyone. That builds up barriers, makes it harder when important information needs to be shared.

We see that play out in today’s Gospel lesson, as we hear about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. After His baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist, Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days. Then, when He’s at His weakest, the devil comes looking for Him. The devil comes to tempt Jesus, to test Jesus, to make him doubt who He is, what His mission is, and how God the Father cares for Him.

The devil had lots of experience in getting people to doubt God’s word and promises. The first temptation came in the Garden of Eden, where the devil asked Eve, “Did God really say that?” Why don’t you just test it out? What’s the worst that could happen? Doubt crept

into Eve about God’s command, and she and Adam both put God to the test. “You will not surely die...” Yet through their failure, death came into the world.

In his first of these three temptations of Jesus, the devil tries to get Jesus to doubt God’s provision. God provided bread in the wilderness to the Israelites. When we confess how God created the heavens and the earth, Luther reminds us that also means that God provides us with all that we need physically. Jesus, when teaching his disciples to pray, taught them to ask God for their daily bread.

Yet now, after fasting for forty days in the wilderness, Jesus is hungry. Jesus needs to eat. But he knows that his power is not to be used selfishly, for himself alone, but for others. And so, creating food out of stones, or out of thin air, only comes later, when there are at least 4,000 or 5,000 hungry people milling around. Only then does Jesus create bread.

But here, responding to the devil, Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, Moses’ farewell sermon to the people of Israel when their forty years in the wilderness was coming to an end. And the part that Jesus quotes is about how God had been with the people of Israel, providing for them, giving them bread from heaven. God had showed them that he would provide for his people, and Jesus remembered that and trusted in God’s promises.

In the second temptation, the devil tries to get Jesus to doubt God’s protection. He takes Jesus to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem, and again slanders him. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. Surely God will catch you.” And here we see another of the devil’s tactics; he can quote Scripture, too. He quotes Psalm 91, “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

This is part of why it’s important to know your Bible, so you can identify when Scripture is quoted or misused. Last month, after Nancy Pelosi said she prayed for President Trump at the National Prayer Breakfast, Donald Trump Jr tweeted out, “Likelihood of Nancy Pelosi praying for Trump is about the same as

the likelihood of Satan going around quoting the Scriptures.” He must have forgotten this story, which appears in both Matthew and Luke.

But again, Jesus resists where the people of God had earlier fallen to temptation. He will not chance death just to test God. It’s not that Jesus feared death. No, he knew that his death needed to mean something, and would be when and where God commanded it. As theologian Martin Franzmann put it, Jesus here proved that he was the “Son of God, who would not leap from the temple at satanic suggestion but could at God’s command leap from greater heights than the temple pinnacle to greater depths than the courtyard floor.” Jesus knew God would protect Him, but he didn’t need to put that protection to the test.

In the third temptation, the devil tries to get Jesus to doubt God’s power or preeminence. Satan is playing God. Not just in demanding the worship that belongs to God alone. No, Satan is echoing God’s promises to the people of Israel. God had told Abraham, “Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever” (Genesis 13:14-15). God repeated that promise to Isaac, to Jacob, and to Moses. Not only is God the only one who is to be worshiped, but God is the only one who can give power on Earth. Yet the devil claims he can give over the kingdoms of the world.

And so Jesus ends the temptation with the final word. “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.” With those words, with that statement of faith and trust from Deuteronomy, he forces Satan to withdraw. Jesus knows who he is, and whose he is. He knows that he belongs to God, and not to the devil. Jesus doesn’t let the devil’s testing and tempting get him to doubt God’s word and God’s promises.

Jesus resisted the devil, and gives us the power to resist. More than that, he continued to resist the devil’s temptations all the way to the cross, where the devil was defeated once and for all.

Because of that, because of the temptations that Jesus went through and resisted, he is with us in all of our temptations, as well. As we read in Hebrews 4, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been

tempted as we are, yet without sin” (4:15). And, as Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, a group of people who were certainly familiar with temptation, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

We may be surrounded by fake news, but we know the only news that matters for eternity. Jesus resisted the devil’s temptations. Jesus followed his Father’s will. Jesus went to the cross, for you. Jesus died, for you. That’s the most true news there is, and what wonderful news to share.

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