

Hope for the Struggle

Matthew 4:1-11

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Lent 1

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

³The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."⁴But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying 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.'" ⁷Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

"Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. (NRSV)

I

Over the last four months I've participated in a number of conversations with other Mennonites about the new reality here in the United States. In these conversations people name at least three aspects of our new reality, which I list here in no particular order.

1. The reigning political climate openly vilifies immigrants and refugees, some of the very people the Bible urges us to care for.
2. Blatant, open racism is on the rise.
3. Some of the events and statements during the recent national election coarsely demeaned women.

The question I've frequently been hearing Mennonites ask is this: how will this new reality change our mission? Given the new reality we live in, how will our mission as a church shift in the next two to four years? How will it change the way we think? The way we act?

We will need to live into this question as we go along. It's a question we answer gradually as events unfold. However, I hope that as we live with this question we will

ground ourselves in scripture, because the Bible has plenty to say about immigrants, race relations, and the dignity of all people.

II

To that end, turn with me to Matthew 4. This story does not name refugees, race, or the treatment of women, but it does name the conflict that underlies all those things.

The entire gospel of Matthew hinges on one specific conflict. The story of this gospel twists and turns around a single, over-arching, long-term conflict that keeps reappearing in skirmish after skirmish. This conflict is the clash between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. Later in 4:17, Jesus alludes to the clash between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of this world when he proclaims that people should "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Repent means to turn away from something and start walking in a different direction.

Most of us don't pay enough attention to that word "kingdom." The Greek word for kingdom is *basileia* (pronounced bas-il-i'-ah), which is the same Greek word the Romans used to talk about their "empire." For most people in the first century, *basileia* meant the Roman Empire, with its egomaniacal emperors and its callous disregard for vulnerable people. Therefore when Jesus announces that the *basileia* of God is on its way, everyone within earshot immediately suspects he is talking about a new reality different from, and opposed to, the Roman *basileia*. We can paraphrase it this way: Jesus is urging people to repent of trusting in the Roman Empire and kingdoms like it, and instead start trusting in the kingdom of God.

As we read Matthew, we want to keep this clash of kingdoms in mind. Behind this clash of kingdoms stands two major protagonists. The chief protagonist on one side of the conflict is God, while the chief protagonist on the other side of the conflict is the devil. Each protagonist mostly acts off-stage, behind the scenes. The main persons in the story who represent God are of course Jesus himself and the Holy Spirit, along with the women and men who collaborate with them.

By contrast, the main persons who represent the devil and the kingdoms of this world are figures like Herod the Great, the chief priests and the Sanhedrin, Pontius Pilate, and a miscellaneous group of demons whom Jesus casts out. Also arrayed on the side of evil are social realities such as poverty, economic oppression, hunger, and illness. The gospel's purpose is to show us the conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world, and then to help us cooperate with Jesus in resisting the evil perpetrated by the kingdoms of the world.

Matthew 4:1-11 shows us this conflict in simple, direct terms: it's a contest between Jesus and the devil. This is the only time in the entire gospel when the devil appears as a character in the action. The rest of the time he works behind the scenes through religious and political rulers, through demons, and through forces like violence, sickness, and hunger. The devil knows very well that Jesus represents God. The devil's strategy is to corrupt Jesus, to use guile and charm to flip Jesus over to his side.

The third temptation is the key to the entire conflict between Jesus and the devil.¹ The third temptation shows us that the heart of this conflict is a disagreement about what kind of power to use in the world. The devil argues that political and economic power is what really matters:

⁸Again, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

An amazing detail about this part of the story is that the devil claims to own "the kingdoms of the world and their splendor." What's even more amazing is that Jesus never disagrees with him. Both the devil and Jesus seem to agree that the devil does in fact own the nations of the world and has the power to give that ownership to Jesus. In any case, the devil argues that if Jesus really wants to make a difference in the world, then he needs to grab political and economic power.

¹ Douglas John Hall, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 44-49.

But Jesus rejects the devil's argument and successfully resists the devil's temptation. Jesus knows that political and economic power are not important for his mission. He doesn't need them to accomplish what he came to accomplish.

III

Christians claim to follow Jesus, but we have not been as successful as Jesus in resisting the temptation to grab political power. When the emperor Constantine came to power in the early 300s and adopted a friendly attitude toward Christians, the Christian church was only too happy to cozy up to Constantine in return. Under Constantine, the church now had power and political influence. This began a close working relationship between the church and the state that lasted throughout the Middle Ages, right up through the Reformation and beyond.

We Christians often succumb to the temptation to grab political power. Some people see the most recent national election as an event when liberal Christians lost political power and evangelical Christians gained it. Both liberal and evangelical Christians claim to follow Jesus, but when it comes to political power, neither camp follows Jesus.² Both sides are quite happy when they have a president, a Congress, and statehouses that they think will give them the power they want.

IV

Let us recognize that although Jesus rejects political power, he does embrace other types of power. We can identify three types of power that Jesus embraces in this story for the sake of God's mission.

First, he uses the power of scripture. Simply knowing scripture isn't good enough, because as this story illustrates, the devil can quote scripture almost as well as Jesus can. The difference between the devil and Jesus is that the devil misappropriates scripture for

² James Sledge, "What Christ the King Sunday Teaches Us about Exercising Power," *The Christian Century*, November 16, 2016, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2016-11/what-christ-king-sunday-teaches-us-about-exercising-power>, accessed January 27, 2017.

his own sad purposes, while Jesus uses scripture in the right context, at the right time, and for the right purposes. Only Jesus applies scripture wisely.

Second, Jesus uses the power of refusal. In a word, Jesus says “No!” He says no to the devil, no to the devil’s proposals, and no to the evil which the devil tries to perpetuate. Some social and political theorists have argued that the simple act of saying no has a far greater effect than you might initially think. These theorists point out that all governments, even repressive ones, rest on the consent of the governed, and that when enough ordinary people say no, they can force the government to change course. When people refuse to cooperate, harmful policies can be halted, modified, or reversed.³

Third, Jesus relies on the power of worshiping God—and this is where Jesus says yes. He says no to the devil, but he says yes to God. He will fall down and worship only God. Martin Luther King, Jr. and many other civil rights leaders in the 1950s and 1960s knew their best chance of saying no to the evil of racism was in the church’s ability to say yes to God in worship. Behind the public events of the civil rights movement was the sustaining power that resisters received from worshiping God. If it had not been for Christian worship, the civil rights movement might not have happened, or if it did happen, might have looked very different.

V

In the gospel of Matthew the stage is now set. The devil slinks off defeated and Jesus faithfully stays the course. The mission of God can now move forward. To be sure, the conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world isn’t over yet. But in this little skirmish between Jesus and the devil a new hope has emerged: it now looks like God and Jesus are going to win.

³ Gene Sharp is one such theorist, though not the only one. See Mairi Mackay, “Gene Sharp: A Dictator’s Worst Nightmare,” CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/06/23/world/gene-sharp-revolutionary>, accessed January 27, 2017.