

## Sermon Song: Putting God's Love to the Test

### *Matthew 4: 1-11*

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' " Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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.' "

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.' " Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Recently read a story about a famous actor who had to make a tough decision. He was working a lot spending time away from his family, but then he found out he had cancer. In the sobering moment he reassessed his life, looked at what he was missing, and just like that it was crystal clear it was time for his path to change. I mean, some would say he had it all: fame and fortune and a life most people dream about; but he realized he didn't really have it all. Because in the end, what he had wasn't really what mattered. He found himself in a wilderness place, where he had to choose whether to keep going on the path he was on, or take another.

Life is a series of choices, isn't it. Do we stay or do we leave? Do we play it safe or do we take that risk? Do we hold on or do we open up and let go? And as we stand at the crossroads, part of the difficulty is that both choices have their costs. Both have their pain and their consequences. But for some reason, when it comes down to it, we don't often face the deeper questions in our lives until we are forced to. Where we are left with a choice, either to keep going down the path we are already on, or to make the difficult decision of choosing another path, where we will have to face what we've been wanting to ignore and where the only guarantee is that it is not going to be easy.

**In the midst of pain, I choose love. In the midst of pain, sorrow falling down like rain,  
I await the sun again, I choose love.**

Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit after he is baptized. In the exact same way that Israel found themselves in the wilderness after they traveled through the waters thousands of years before, now it's Jesus' turn. And remember how the Israelites grumbled and

complained. How they were hungry and created false idols, and in the process of the journey even wanted to go back to the system of slavery just to go back to the life they knew. And finally, there they were given a choice: either keep going down a path that leads toward destruction, or choose a different path which will be hard, but will ultimately lead to life.

All of this is hanging in the background when Jesus is in the wilderness as well. At his most vulnerable moment, he is tested by the Tempter. He is tempted to make his own meal when he is hungry as his belly grumbles. He is tempted to toss himself off the temple to prove who he is, creating an alternative idol. And finally, he is offered the power to change the world: its policies and practices, if only he bows down and worships the ways of an empire which relies on oppression and violence. You see, each temptation is orchestrated to make Jesus prove who he is, which if we ever have to prove who we are, it just means we really don't trust who we are to begin with. All of these temptations—hunger, becoming an alternative idol, gaining all the power in the world puts God's way to the test. And it doesn't only put God's way to the test, it also puts God's love to the test. And so Jesus is left with the choice: follow the path which circumvents his ministry and suffering, or choose love which leads to a life with us, even if it means going to the cross.

**In the midst of war I choose peace.  
In the midst of war, hate and anger keeping score,  
I will seek the good once more. I choose peace.**

But here's the thing: Jesus responds by saying we don't live by bread alone, but by every word God has spoken. And what are the only words that God ever speaks in the gospel? "You are my beloved child with whom I am pleased!" You see, Jesus isn't immune to wanting to avoid suffering, or find solutions which will provide safety and security. But he clings to his identity as a beloved child of God as if it is the only lifeline he has. Because it is! When we are in the wilderness—you are a beloved child of God. When we are scared and feeling alone—you are a beloved child of God. When it seems like the world is falling apart—you are a beloved child of God. This is who we are. God likes us! God enjoys us! God is for us and all creation! And when we find ourselves in wilderness places we get to decide if we are going to trust it is true or not.

**When my world falls down, I will rise.  
When my world falls down, explanations can't be found.  
I will climb to Holy Ground, I will rise.**

So here's what I've been contemplating lately. Often we speak of God as having a choice to forgive us, or having a choice to heal us, or having a choice to love us. I mean, how many times have we heard, "Well, God could punish us if God really wanted to, but instead God chooses to love us." And this understanding of how God operates has dominated our understanding for a very long time. But what if God doesn't choose love? What if it seems like God chooses love *because God is Love. It's not a choice, Love is who God is!* Choosing others is what love does. Forgiving others is what love does. Being generous and working toward a better world is what love does. And when we step into the flow of who God is, we too center others, and forgive,

and are generous as well. Jesus, in the wilderness, throughout his ministry, and even at the end on the cross, again and again steps into the flow of who God is because THAT is what love does.

Some of you might remember that this song was written after the tragic shooting at Mother Emanuel AME church in Charleston where nine beautiful lives were taken by violence in the name of white supremacy. After that horrible and unbearable event, the church had a choice: do they allow his hate to rule their lives? Or will they choose to forgive as best they can and allow God's love to have the final word? And what did they choose? They chose to step into the flow of God's eternal, freeing, never-ending love.

So no matter what, we always have a choice. Do we stay or do we leave? Do we play it safe or do we risk it? Do we hold on or do we step into the flow of God's eternal, freeing, never-ending love as if it is the only lifeline we have? Because at the end of the day, it is...

**In the midst of pain, I choose love.  
In the midst of pain, sorrow falling down like rain,  
I await the sun again, I choose love.**