

BaptistWay: The temptation of the King

December 4, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Dec. 20 focuses on Matthew 4:1-11.*

This passage follows immediately after Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. Jesus is "led by the Spirit" into the wilderness (v. 1). This is the third reference to the Spirit in Matthew's Gospel, with the first two involving Jesus' conception and his affirmation in the Jordan River (1:18-20; 3:16). This mention, though, is odd because the Spirit is leading Jesus "to be tempted by the devil" (v. 1). This detail should catch our attention and remain with us as we reflect on the passage.

The devil presents are three temptations. In fact, the exchange is fairly simple—the devil tempts Jesus three times, and each time Jesus refutes the initial advance and responds with a scriptural quotation. These trials must have been difficult to refuse, especially after spending "40 days and 40 nights" in the wilderness. In the previous lesson, we discussed the importance of the wilderness in forming the communal character of the people of Israel.

Wilderness a place of testing

As this passage also displays, the wilderness also was Israel's place of testing and failure. It was in the wilderness that the Israelites grumbled about poor food supplies—including the lack of bread—and in the wilderness, the Israelites fashioned idols to worship instead of Yahweh. Jesus, like Israel, goes to the wilderness and experiences similar temptations to abandon covenant fidelity.

The temptations themselves are fairly straightforward, even if they have a

deeper significance. In the first, Jesus is asked to turn stones into bread, thereby demonstrating he is the Son of God (v. 3). Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 in response, noting God's word is the food that will satisfy his hunger (v. 4). The devil then challenges Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, using Psalm 91 as an assurance of safety (vv. 5-6). Jesus' reply, drawn from Deuteronomy 6:16, is to not "put the Lord your God to the test" (v. 7).

Finally, the tempter offers all worldly power to Jesus if he will worship him (vv. 8-9). While this temptation is bolder and more transparent than the previous ones, it is nonetheless the same as the others by asking Jesus to act faithlessly towards God. Jesus responds by paraphrasing Deuteronomy 6:13, thereby ending the trial (v. 10). Satan departs, and Jesus begins recovering from his ordeal (v. 11).

Jesus' temptation

Much has been made of the types of temptations put forward by Satan. Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, in a portion of *The Brothers Karamazov*, describes this biblical encounter around the themes of miracle, mystery and authority. Gregory of Nyssa observes a link between the temptations of the first human being (first Adam) and those experiences here by Christ (second Adam). Other commentators have identified the temptations as centering on physical needs, self-reliance and idolatry. Regardless of how these experiences of Jesus are described thematically, we should recognize there is more here than an account of a specific event in Jesus' life.

In short, by understanding Christ's temptations in light of such themes, we can see the ways in which the temptations are not unique to Jesus. That is, his temptations are not to perform special actions reserved only for a divine being; they encompass our own daily trials to act unfaithfully as well. In other words, Jesus is tempted in his humanity to betray humanity's true nature. However, he does not sin and therefore fulfills humanity's intended

purpose. Indeed, as the book of Hebrews states, Jesus “has been tempted like us in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

However, the significance of Jesus’ temptation is not limited to being parallel to our personal experiences. One remaining question needs to be answered: Why was Jesus tempted at all? While being like us in our humanity is important to remember, more must be said. In fact, this question actually brings us back to the first verse, to the Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness. It seems Jesus’ trials were necessary for some additional purpose. To discuss this purpose, we need to remember how Jesus is related to Israel in Matthew’s Gospel.

Following the Spirit’s lead

Like the Israelites who were guided by God in the wilderness outside of Egypt, Jesus follows the Spirit’s lead. That wilderness, where Israel spent 40 years, proved to be their undoing as they failed to maintain covenant faithfulness in the face of trials. Jesus, the one who also was called out of Egypt (2:15) and the one who later passed through the waters (3:16), fasts 40 days in the wilderness in order to do what Israel could not. Yet, this accomplishment was not an abolition of Israel and its covenant promises. Rather, Christ’s faithfulness when tempted actually fulfilled those promises. As a result, those tied to Jesus are the covenant people of God.