

Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSV)

The Temptation of Jesus
(Mk 1.12—13; Lk 4.1—13)

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴ But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ 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.’ ”

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”

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

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’ ”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.¹

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Scripture, Bread and Finding the Truth

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Text: *Matthew 4:1-11*

This morning we are let in on a proof-texting contest between Jesus and the devil. Proof-texting may be somewhat unfamiliar; although I expect you have all seen it. Proof-texting is quoting verses from the Bible to prove a point. For example, I might quote John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” to prove that Jesus died for me. Or I might quote the Commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness,” to prove that God prohibits lying.

Sometimes proof-texting is used to debate. One person might turn to First Corinthians and quote Paul, “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.” 1 Corinthians 14:34 to prove that women should not be ministers. But another person might counter with, “Yes, but Paul says in Galatians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” and that proves that Paul really means that women and men are fully equal in Christ, and that women ought to be allowed do whatever men do.

Well, this morning we are in the big leagues, the heavyweight championship of proof-texting debate, as it were. “This morning, here in the left corner, fighting for the Kingdom of God, in the white toga, we have Jesus, also known as the Christ. And here in the right corner, fighting to take your soul, in the red trunks and the three-timed fork, we have the devil, also known as Satan, and sometimes as Beelzebub. Gentlemen, we expect a clean fight. You may quote scripture only. No hitting below the belt with verses from the Gospel of Mary, or the Dead Sea Scrolls. No quotes from the Apocrypha. And no making up new stuff. Good luck gentlemen.”

With that the fight begins. The devil begins with a jab. It’s not exactly a quote from the Bible, but it falls under general knowledge, so it’s okay. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” The crowd watches intently, maybe anxiously. But Jesus jabs back with a fine rebuttal from scripture, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Deuteronomy 8:3.

The devil takes the punch. The crowd nods with admiration. But then the devil recovers and jabs again. He takes Jesus to the high pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and says, “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.’” Psalm 91, verses 11 and 12.”

The devil smiles at his own brilliance. The crowd gasps. But the blow hardly lands when Jesus jabs back, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Deuteronomy 6:16”

Satan staggers. He gets up. He decides it’s time to land his most potent punch. He takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor;

and he says to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” This could be the knockout. But Jesus calmly absorbs the thunderous punch and strikes back with a right hook of his own, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ Deuteronomy 6:13, and also 10:20.”

The crowd cheered. The devil slunk away in defeat. And the angels came and tended the victorious fighter, Jesus the Christ, heavyweight champion of heaven and hell. Whoa! What a fight! What a contest! That proof-texting stuff can get pretty rough!

It’s a great story. And, it’s got the ending we would hope for. Jesus claims his victory over Satan. He has a parade through Boston on a duck boat. Bill Belichick hires him as his new defensive coordinator.

But this story raises at least two interesting complexities. First, the devil can quote scripture. That means that scripture isn’t quite as simple and transparent as it might seem, or as we might like it. We have right in scripture itself a case where the devil quotes scripture, and the whole point of the story is that the devil is wrong. One thing we cannot help but take away from this story is that quoting scripture is no guarantee of speaking the truth. In the story that isn’t too significant, because we know the characters. We know that Jesus is supposed to be right and that the devil is supposed to be wrong. But what about here and now. When proof-texting battles occur today, how are we to decide who is right and who is wrong? How are we to decide who is Jesus and who is the devil? For Christians today these are important questions because we believe that the scripture has some form of authority, even though we may not all agree about the details of that authority. And the questions are important because there are many important debates today in which the Bible is quoted by both sides. So, it’s important to know, if we can, how to understand the authority of the Bible and how to tell when a person quotes the Bible whether that person is closer to Jesus or to the devil.

The second interesting complexity is perhaps related to the first. If one were to take Jesus’ quotation of Deuteronomy about bread—One does not live by bread alone—as the last word on his feelings about bread, one would judge that Jesus has a rather low opinion of it, or at least that it’s not all that important. That would prepare us poorly for the ways in which bread appears in the rest of the Gospel.

Let’s stay with Matthew’s Gospel, since that’s the one from which we read the temptation story this morning. In chapter 4 Jesus says that one does not live by bread alone and refuses the devil’s challenge to change stones into bread.

Yet, in Matthew 6:11, Jesus teaches his disciples the prayer we say together every Sunday. He says we should pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” In Matthew 7:9, in a verse that echoes this morning’s story, Jesus says to his listeners, “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?” In Matthew 14 and 15 we have the story of feeding the five thousand. When the hour became late, and crowds became hungry, Jesus did not say to them, “Tighten your belt, friends. No one lives by bread alone.” Nor did he send them away to get their own bread. In one of the most important stories in the Gospels Jesus demonstrates God’s promise of abundance. He multiplies five loaves and a few fish in order to feed the crowd of 5,000. And then, finally, in 26:26, at the last supper, when he is giving his disciples final instructions, he leaves them with the symbol second in importance only to the cross. The passage says, “While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke

it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’”

It would be hard to imagine Jesus leaving a catalog of more positive references to bread. Nonetheless, in this morning’s passage he spurns the devil when the devil challenges him to turn stones into bread.

So, we are back square in the face of our questions. How are we to read the meaning and authority of scripture? And, how are we to know whether it is Jesus or the devil we are listening to when someone quotes scripture to us?

I wish I had easy answers to these questions for you. But like so many things in life, there are no easy answers, or saying it another way, easy answers are bound to be wrong answers. Indeed, the seemingly inborn human desire for simple answers often plagues us. From politics to relationships to religion too often we steer away from the complex and prefer the simple, even if the simple ultimately serves us poorly. It’s interesting to note that this perspective I have just voiced, that the questions have complicated answers, already begins to shape where those answers will go, or at least where they will not. The appeal of Biblical fundamentalism is its intended stark simplicity. If the Bible is, every word, dictated by God and true in the fullest and most certain sense, then interpreting scripture would presumably be a rather straightforward matter. But as we have seen throughout this sermon, one can find all kinds of quotes in the Bible, and so even fundamentalists find themselves in complicated territory as they explain away the apparent discrepancies.

In any case, because I think reading the Bible is complicated, and because I think understanding whether someone is using the Bible more like the devil than like Jesus is complicated, it follows that I don’t think that passages quoted from Bible in every case reliably and obviously declare God’s will. I am grateful for this. Deuteronomy 21:21 declares that the men of the town should stone a rebellious son to death. Maybe others of you are as grateful as I am that this law seems not be applied very much these days.

On the other hand, I absolutely hold that within the Bible we may discern God’s true word for us. By that I mean more than that I can find things in the Bible that I agree with. Too often, among all persuasions of Christians, that’s the standard by which the truth of a particular passage is determined. Do I agree with it? If the Bible doesn’t challenge our beliefs at least some of the time, then we are not looking at the Bible, we are looking at a mirror. Most proof-texting that I have seen falls into this category. The Bible is simply a mirror when I find a passage to justify what I already believe, and then quote it and then claim God’s authority for my belief. I imagine God shivers whenever we engage in such distortions.

The way I have come to think of discerning the Bible’s truth is first to believe that in it, taken as a whole, we can ascertain certain fundamental perspectives of God, which no interpretation of the Bible ought to contradict. Here are some I think I have found. God loves humankind, even if we wear God’s patience thin. God wishes us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. God wishes us to do the things that build up creation, communities, and relationships, not the things that tear them down. God is in favor liberation from inequality, oppression, and other things that injure each other and alienate us from God’s hopes for us. God is often critical of the ways of societies and cultures. God prefers forgiveness to retribution. These are a few to start with. Discovering these fundamentals is a matter of reading the whole of the Bible and trying to sense some of its most basic trajectories, values and truths. They provide a starting point. These truths are more provisional than absolute in the sense that reading the Bible may

convince us that one or the other needs some adjustment. On the other hand, I believe that the ones I have mentioned would find remarkable consensus.

Now there is one more significant hurdle. Without getting into too much detail, or boring you to death, interpreting individual passages from the Bible is complicated by a variety of factors. We may be guessing at the meaning of some of the ancient customs that are in the stories. We have to translate from other languages, and translation always involves choices, and what the translator chooses is a matter of interpretation. The meaning the text had in its time is not always so readily transported into our time. For example, how many Christians find circumcision to be an important religious issue? Not many, I suppose, but for Paul and his churches it was of huge importance. So, even when we have some fundamental perspectives in hand, each passage of the Bible continues to present complications. I suppose all of this is to say that the Bible requires careful and disciplined study.

In any case let's take a look at our championship proof-texting bout between Jesus and the devil and see if careful interpretation and the use of our basic principles help us understand what's going on.

The temptation passage occurs right after Jesus' baptism, before he begins his ministry. We can expect it to illuminate some of his basic themes, then. If we look at it as a whole, it would appear that the devil is offering Jesus the power and wealth of the world. Temptation is probably a bad translation of what's going on here. A better one is testing; the devil is testing Jesus. But in a sense, it's even more basic than that. The devil may well have been offering Jesus the things he assumes anyone would want—snapping your fingers when you are hungry and bread appears from the stones, the avoidance of earthly death, and power and wealth. But Jesus claims the basic ground of his ministry. Ingesting only the bread you eat and forgetting about the nourishing word that comes from God will leave you starving. Requiring God to prove immortality in a physical way turns a matter of faith into a science experiment, and disregards the greater promises of God. And the pursuit of power and wealth of the world, rather than the power and wealth of God, will leave you at the end of the day poor, indeed. These represent themes of Jesus' ministry. He is putting us on notice that he will come back to them time and again.

When we look at the title bout between the devil and Jesus in these terms, we realize that Jesus is not denigrating bread, but is simply saying that physical bread without spiritual bread will not satisfy real hunger. Jesus is quoting scripture in service of and consistently with the basic perspectives he finds in scripture. The most convincing answer, then, to how one tells if the person quoting scripture is more like Jesus or more like the devil, the most convincing answer is found in how consistent or inconsistent the proof-texter is with the basic teachings of Jesus and the Bible.

In our passage this morning the devil was the devil because he represented the values that much of the world espouses, values that Jesus threw a knockout punch against. In short, if you hear someone representing worldly gain and power as the word of God, you can bet it's the devil who is quoting you scripture. As the Gospel says elsewhere, "Let those who have ears hear." Amen.