

BMC – Lent 1

Shaped by Testing – “Scripture Shaped Prayer for Desert Times”

Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 3:17, 4:1-11

This morning I want to begin by highlighting the title I have given my sermon today which is “Scripture Shaped Prayer for Desert Times.” I hope by the end of the sermon, you will have a sense for what this title attempts to capture in six words and how it relates to our story from Matthew 4 this morning. Let us enter that story more deeply first by closing our eyes and imagining a specific scene. It is Jesus, fresh from his baptism, the dampness still on his cloak. Jesus is standing just about a mile away from the Jordan River, and he is looking towards a barren wilderness. He does not entirely remember why he walked in this direction. He felt as if he was a passive actor in his movement; almost as if he had been pushed. He didn’t ask to come to this point, but there he was and he knew he was going to have to go further, deeper into the wilderness. As he again begins to move, a prayer crosses his lips. The prayer sounds familiar to us, but it is spoken in a more personal tone and contains some differences from the one we are used to praying:

Father in heaven, Holy Be Your Name. I long for your Kingdom Come and Your will to be done, on earth, here and now, as it is in heaven. Give me today the bread from heaven, and forgive my trespasses, as I forgive those who trespass against me. Lead me not into temptation, Father, but deliver me from evil. For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. Forever and ever. Amen.

Imagine now the image of Jesus walking further away from your view, deeper into the wilderness, now a blurry figure blending into the barren landscape. You can open your eyes now. I have asked us to enter this imaginative exercise this morning because as I meditated on the scripture for this morning, I found myself wondering, “did Jesus pray as he entered the desert? And if he did, *what did* Jesus pray as he entered the desert?” I have imagined that he prayed

something like what we later come to know as the Lord's prayer, words that can be found on the lips of Jesus in his sermon on the mount in Matthew 6:9-13, just two chapters after Matthew's account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Reading through the story of the temptation of Jesus again this week, I couldn't help but be struck by the idea that perhaps *these words*, perhaps *this prayer* was on Jesus' lips, sustaining him over the period of 40 days in the desert, and giving him the wisdom to overcome the tempter. After all, in its content, much of the prayer expresses confessionally what Jesus expresses in the form of rebuttals and arguments against the suggestions of the tempter. Let's look at a few resonances:

1. "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Your Kingdom come, Your will be done" and at the end of the prayer, "yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory" – These words mirror Jesus' refusal of the tempter's invitation to worship him. By so refusing, Jesus kept God's name Holy, worshipping it alone. Furthermore, Jesus prayed for a kingdom to come and a will to be done that was different than his own and different from the many kingdoms of the world that the devil had offered him if only he would worship him.
2. "Give us today the bread from heaven" – Did this phrasing surprise you as we read it? There is an unusual Greek word in Jesus' prayer in the sermon on the mount (*epiousion*), a word that is used nowhere else in all of the Bible, and many translators think it means either what we are used to, the redundant phrase "Give us this day our daily bread," *or* that it expresses an original Aramaic phrase meaning "bread for tomorrow," or the bread of the end-time banquet. If this latter translation is assumed, Jesus was telling his disciples to pray, not simply for daily sustenance, but for the bread of the Messianic age to come (the bread of tomorrow) – the bread provided by God as the Kingdom of Heaven is realized on earth. These words resonate in their own way, then, with Jesus' retort to the devil, that one is not sustained by the provisions of regular bread but must be sustained through God's powerful word.
3. "Do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from evil" – Having been led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray that God would not lead them into temptation. This is an interesting one, isn't it? Is Jesus instructing his disciples to pray that God would help us *avoid* trials or temptations? Maybe that's the case. Knowing how difficult trials can be, maybe this really is a prayer to avoid them altogether. But I wonder if it could also mean something like, don't let us fall into temptation and be overcome by it. The second part of the prayer, "deliver us from evil," perhaps suggests that Jesus knew his disciples would indeed

face trials but that he wanted them to look to God to deliver them in those situations, not to test God by scheming their own plans for deliverance that circumvented God's assistance.

Given these three resonances between the Lord's prayer and Jesus' responses to the tempter, I really can imagine Jesus praying this prayer as he entered the desert.

But, in noting some of these resonances, there's something I've intentionally left out of my reflection so far, and that is the foundational source and inspiration behind Jesus' responses to the tempter and so perhaps also the inspiration behind the prayer he would later teach his disciples. One thing is for certain, Jesus' responses to the devil, and so perhaps also much of the prayer he taught his disciples, were shaped by his rootedness in his Jewish tradition and its teachings. Jesus had clearly taken to heart Israel's own testing in the desert, which he would have learned about through the words and teachings of the Torah and the Psalms. It is to the teachings of Deuteronomy, after all, that Jesus turns again and again in his time of testing.

Jesus was tired and hungry just as Israel had been tired and hungry in their desert wanderings. Jesus would have known the traditions that said that God had "humbled" Israel with hunger and then fed them with "manna" *each day*—daily bread from heaven—to teach them that "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." (Deuteronomy 8:3). Also, like Israel, Jesus' desert wanderings came at a time he was navigating his special calling, a calling that he received as he passed through the waters of baptism. He was named as God's beloved son, the same name God had given Israel when he told Pharaoh to let his "firstborn son," Israel, out of Egypt to worship him (Exodus 4:22-23). And just as Israel passed through the waters safely protected by the angel of the Lord (Exodus 14:19) only later to be tempted to doubt God's provision (Exodus 17:1-7; Deut. 6:16), so too Jesus was tempted to test whether God really would send his angels to save him in his own time of danger (Matt. 4:6). And finally, like his ancestors before him, Jesus was called to fear and serve God alone

(Deuteronomy 6:13). All of these words found in Deuteronomy were words that God had spoken in the past to Israel, and they were crucial resources for Jesus to draw on while being tempted in the desert. Jesus used them as rebuttals to counter the suggestions of the tempter, but one could just as easily imagine Jesus using them positively, to shape his prayer life as well.

Now, I want us to imagine for a moment an alternative temptation scenario. A scenario in which Jesus did not have scriptural resources at his disposal from his own tradition to pray with and to counter the tempter with. As disturbing as it might be to hear the story read this way, here is how the passage could have sounded in this imagined scenario:

Matthew 4:1-11 (alter-ego) 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 And considering the tempters suggestion, he called out to God saying, "Why did you bring me into the desert, to kill me with hunger and thirst?" And lifting up his staff, he commanded rocks to become loaves of bread. Almost as soon as Jesus brought the bread to his mouth, it began to breed worms and become foul. 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.'" Considering the tempters suggestion, Jesus called out to God saying, "You call me your son and want me to go prepare your people for the coming kingdom, but how am I supposed to make them trust a carpenter from Nazareth unless they see a sign of your presence with them?" And saying this, Jesus jumped from the pinnacle. Angels protected him, and many in that moment believed. But just as soon as he had wowed the crowds, the crowds dispersed looking yet again for another sign. 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." Considering the tempters suggestion, Jesus called out to God saying, where are you when I need you? How am I supposed to call your people to welcome the kingdom when you seem so absent. At least this one with me here is promising a way to inherit the kingdoms of the world. Away with you, God! And Jesus bowed down and worshipped the devil. And when he looked up, all he saw was a golden calf.

By imagining this disturbing, alternative account of the temptation of Jesus, I am perhaps asking us to reflect on that old saying: "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." In this alternative version of the story, Jesus had not taken to heart God's instruction to Israel through the prophets that constantly reminded them of their desert experience and how they were

not to repeat the fall into temptation that was experienced by them in their desert wanderings.

From this imagined scenario, I want to make one, simple point: **as followers of Jesus, we cannot avoid the possibility of temptations, but we can be *prepared* to be tested by having scripture-shaped prayers at the ready.** By being so prepared, our times of testing can shape us positively, making us stronger as we draw on the resources of God's Word for us. Jesus' responses to the tempter, and later, the prayer he taught his disciples, give us a picture of how we might be prepared for trials and temptations in life – by having scripture-shaped prayers, built upon words from God, and seared into our memory to draw on in difficult moments.

I think having scripture-shaped prayers ready on our lips every day could have significant benefits for us as disciples of Jesus. Nowadays, if you scour articles on achieving mental health and wellbeing, you might come across health practitioners that recommend *mantras*, words or short phrases, as important tools for wellness amidst stressful and difficult times. While probably much longer than most mantras, I like to think of a prayer like the Lord's prayer as fulfilling the same kind of function, but with the goal of centering and grounding us on the truth that we are creatures made in the image of God and called to become more and more like Jesus. The words in the Lord's prayer can center and ground us, especially in trying times, times where we struggle with our own weaknesses and recognize areas that God is calling us to grow. We need not be confined to using only the Lord's prayer, of course. There are so many important words of scripture that can ground us, just as they did Jesus. Perhaps words of a favourite hymn or a Taizé chant might fulfill the same function, based as they so often are on scripture.

So, here is a challenge for each of us, this Lent: **find a scripture-shaped prayer to take with you throughout this season.** Whether it's the Lord's prayer or something else, pray it more regularly, pray it in the morning, and see how it changes your day. Or try praying it in a moment

of weakness, difficulty, stress, or sorrow, and see how it impacts you. And maybe, just maybe, in times where you find yourself being led into a barren wilderness like Jesus, this prayer might cross your lips, and God's presence will surround you, and angels will minister to you in your time of need. May it be so. Amen.