

February 26, 2023
First Lent

Matthew 4:1-11

“Reading the Classics: Survival Training”

I grew up in a family where it was common to be told my father was going to be gone for a week, months or a year for his work in the Air Force. I took it for granted that everyone’s dad disappeared on occasion – sometimes to go to Survival School. It was kind of unnerving really. I mean, if you fail survival school, does that mean you won’t be coming home? Fortunately, I never had to find out. But I did learn, in passing conversation about some of the things my father had when he was doing Survival training. Each of them seem quite simple – and each of them are important in their own way. And we will come back to these later.

Our story from Matthew’s Gospel today *relates a story from Jesus’ life which has all the marks of survival training*. Jesus has God’s affirmation at his baptism that he is beloved, and the very spirit who descends on him “like a dove” at baptism – drives him into the desert. We are inclined to think to ourselves, “*with friends like that – who needs enemies?*” Having drawn closer to God – the last thing we want is this kind of experience.

Matthew’s original audience would have understood this experience of Jesus as following *directly in line with the children of Israel in the Desert*. They were tempted in the same way Jesus is – and in the same order. We are being forewarned *we will face temptation if we want to live as God’s children and follow in God’s way*. Temptation isn’t failure – in some ways it is a sign of being on the right track. Each temptation Jesus encounters will be faced at one time or another by all of us. The question is – *can we learn from Jesus* – will we let Jesus teach our survival school?

Let’s look at that first temptation: You have a legitimate physical need – why not take the bull by the horns and meet it? Wouldn’t that be the most reasonable course of action? *It might be...* if all we are called to do is *scratch out a living and meet immediate needs for ourselves*. Jesus is called to more, and so are we.

This first temptation relates to meeting basic needs...and in survival school I associate this with the knife one carries. It is carefully designed and helps with everything from cutting through brush to procuring food. Its task is to help meet immediate needs – *in service of the bigger picture of survival and mission*. Neither the knife nor any of our spiritual journeys is simply about what’s done – but is always about who we are *which determines what we do*. Tools are used in service of someone greater.

The Second temptation is counter intuitive. In this *temptation scripture is quoted as a means of bringing about behavior displeasing to God*. Let's not miss this part of the passage. Scripture, which is crucial, can be quoted -especially in snippets – to justify bad behavior. For our survival school, I think this temptation relates to the waterproof matches. Why? Because *at its root, this temptation is all about self-understanding*. With the word, “if” – Jesus’ identity is called into question. We fall prey to this kind of temptation *when we believe we are “less than” and need to prove we are “more.”* The spark of the fire of our lives can be extinguished by throwing water on our confidence that we are God’s. None of us are perfect – so it is an effective temptation to question if we really belong to the Most High God – and we can be tempted to try and prove it by *lacking humility, being inflexible and demanding everyone else experience God exactly as we do*. We are enough. *We have enough - to live the life of faith with holy daring*. Living by the spirit and growing in faith we – like the waterproof matches – can burn brightly in adversity for God.

The last temptation is the boldest appeal to self-interest. The first two were shielded in an attempt to be reasonable or even spiritual. Not this one. All pretense is set aside with an *overwhelming appeal to self-glorification*. It is also an appeal to taking a short cut. In Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi we are told every knee will bow to Jesus – the resurrected Lord. There *will be* glory and all the kingdoms of the world for him. In today’s text we are at the very beginning of Jesus ministry – to seek and save the lost – to reconcile the whole world to God – with *an offer for amazing glory with none of the work*. All the kingdoms – none of the suffering. Pretty tempting really. :-) How does Jesus sort this out? With a deep and abiding understanding of true north – *the compass which points us to God so we are never completely lost*, even when we struggle to find our way. We can be tempted to look to family, race or clan for stability and identity. But this is a mistake because *there is only one* through whom we not only receive grace – but also through whom we pass grace along. We live in a disorienting world – and our connection and devotion to God are our only real hope of finding our way by what is real to who is real.

We have begun our journey to the cross. Let’s look to Jesus for lessons in survival school that we may grow in faith and serve in love - on this journey, and beyond.