

“The Devil Made Me Do It”

Matthew 4:1-11

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Our attention this morning is drawn to the temptations of Jesus recorded in Matthew’s gospel. Matthew is not the only writer to tell us about this significant event in Jesus’ life. Mark and Luke also mention it.

Mark’s account is the shortest. He simply reports Jesus was tempted, and angels came and ministered to him. Matthew and Luke, writing a generation later, provide the dialogue which took place between Jesus and Satan.

This conversation has inspired playwrights and comedians. One of Stephen Vincent Benet’s most popular short stories, “The Devil and Daniel Webster,” is about a New Hampshire farmer who sells his soul to the devil and is defended in a trial by Daniel Webster, a fictional version of the famous lawyer and orator.

Those of my generation remember comedian Flip Wilson justifying his many indiscretions by saying, “The Devil made me do it!” I tried that line a few times in my adolescent years, but never received the same reaction Wilson did when he played Geraldine Jones and Brother Leroy.

What intrigues me the most about this event in Jesus’ life is not that it occurred, but when it happened. I am not surprised Jesus was tempted to use his talents, skills, resources, power and influence selfishly in order to build his own kingdom instead of God’s. Every person is tempted to be something less than he or she was created to be. By no means would Jesus be exempt from these powerfully seductive temptations.

No, it was not the fact Jesus was tempted which captures my attention this morning. It is the timing of the visit from the Tempter.

It occurred immediately after Jesus’ baptism and at the beginning of his public ministry. At this time, he had not called one disciple, preached a sermon, taught a lesson, fed a hungry person or healed someone who was sick.

Up to this point, all Jesus had done was show up at the Jordan River to be baptized by John and go on a retreat to think about what it means to love God and live for God among a people chasing after wealth, comfort, fame and power. In the midst of this soul-searching event, the devil showed up with these zany ideas of turning stones to bread, jumping off the Temple and making him the object of worship.

I don't know if Jesus was expecting Satan to join him on this retreat, but I am confident their conversation gave Jesus a clearer image of the opportunities and challenges awaiting him. The mission on which he was embarking could change the world, but it would not be easy. Every day he would face struggles and temptations which would test his commitment to God and his ability to persevere.

Would Jesus become another holy man who began his work with good intentions only to become selfish and sidetracked, or would he remain faithful when facing adversity? To be candid with you, I don't think Jesus knew the answer to this question. Only time would tell. What he did know, however, was what lay ahead of him demanded nothing less than his very best and the highest level of commitment to God and those around him to stay the course.

What lies ahead of you this morning which demands the very best from you? What are you facing which can only be accomplished with the highest level of commitment and strongest amount of determination?

Is it a personal or professional challenge? Is it a problem with a family member or friend which needs to be addressed? Is it an issue at work which demands your expertise?

Is it an opportunity to move in a new direction with your career? Is it the need to travel unfamiliar roads due to the death of a loved one, a divorce or the loss of your job? Is it an opportunity to cast an alternative vision about how life should be lived and speak with a different voice on how conflict should be resolved, as Jesus did throughout his public ministry?

What dormant dream has resurfaced and caught your attention? What moral cause or human dilemma is crying out for your involvement? Whose cry for help has made its way to you?

Will you respond to these needs, dreams and causes by rolling up your sleeves and going to work, or will you turn away from them hoping someone else will get involved?

Before you answer this question, let me remind you that people of faith do not walk away from any opportunity to make hope visible. Jesus did not, and neither can we.

It appears after this encounter with Satan, Jesus went back to his boyhood home of Nazareth and began preparing to move to Capernaum so he could begin his public ministry.

Upon learning that John the Baptist's voice had been silenced by his imprisonment, Jesus began preaching and teaching. Too much was at stake for him to do any less.

What is at stake for you? Who is depending upon you to roll up your sleeves and go to work? Who needs you to respond to the needs, dreams and causes crying out for your involvement?

What must you do to embrace these challenges and respond as Jesus did? After all, they can be daunting and intimidating. Do what Jesus did.

Stay focused. Keep your eyes on the people who need you to accept this challenge and do your best. Never lose sight of them.

Every time Jesus met with resistance or disappointment, he had to decide if this mission was about him or the people he came to serve. Had he decided at any point along his journey life was more about him than them, he would have thrown in the towel. The risks, dangers and frustrations would have become too much for him to endure.

Who is depending upon you to stay on track and do your best every day? Never lose sight of them.

Be disciplined. If this passage teaches us anything it is that our ability to say no to anything harmful and yes to all things good is crucial to remaining faithful to our calling.

The three temptations Satan placed before Jesus that day were especially alluring and enticing. From Matthew's perspective, they were designed to stop him in his tracks before he even got out of the starting gate.

There is no question this same tactic worked on many of the leaders of Jesus' day. They sold their soul to the devil and became addicted to attention, power, pleasure, prestige and lavish lifestyles. They opted to build their own kingdoms instead of advancing God's.

Surely, Jesus would follow in their footsteps; the temptation would be too strong to resist. He did not give in, though, not that day or any day during his time on earth. All the way to the cross he remained true to God's calling in the face of opportunities to choose lesser goals.

Why? He knew if he had to worship anyone other than the God who called him and in whom he placed all his trust, it was too big a price to pay. His mission was to reflect the heart and nature of a righteous and loving God. Any decision which did not meet this standard was rejected. Just because he could do something did not mean he should, and he was wise enough to know when to say no and when to say yes.

Who is depending upon you to remain faithful to the God who called you? Never lose sight of them.

Be careful who you listen to along your journey. Jesus had to decide between listening to the patriarchs and prophets or listening to Satan. He chose the patriarchs and prophets, not because their advice was easy, but because it was best.

Be leery of anyone who encourages you to use your influence selfishly, do anything which does not reflect the nature of God or be something less than what you were created to be. Carefully examine their motives. They have a hidden agenda, and they do not have your interest at heart.

This is why it is crucial you surround yourself with good role models and encouragers, as Jesus did. Immediately after this encounter with Satan, Jesus called twelve disciples to join him on this faith journey. He knew he needed a support group who would listen to him, offer wise counsel, encourage him and pray with him.

If Jesus needed a support group, how much more do we? All of us need friends who will hold us up when we are weak and hold us accountable when we are tempted to stray. We need companions who will ask us tough questions, challenge our faulty thinking and warn us of impending dangers.

Who is depending upon you to choose carefully the voices you listen to each day? Never lose sight of them.

Rely upon God to help you. Certainly Jesus needed the disciples' help, but he also needed God to walk with him.

This would not be the last encounter between Jesus and Satan. Often the tempter would return with new offers and better deals, and he would show up when Jesus was most vulnerable. It would be impossible to resist the temptations he would face without God's help. Others had tried and failed; so would he.

"Every encounter with man must be balanced by an encounter with God," I read years ago. It is called the Pendulum Principle. Jesus believed in it, and so must we.

Who is depending upon you to stay close to God so you can tap into His wisdom and strength? Never lose sight of them.

As you look at what lies ahead of you this week, what do you need to do to remain faithful to God and those depending upon you? Say yes to a need, a dream or a cause? Take the first step? Stay focused? Be disciplined? Listen to the right people? Rely more upon God?

Let's pray about it and ask the One who walked alongside Jesus to help you.