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## Provision, Prominence, Power

Matthew 4:1-11

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 1, 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

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The waters of the Jordan River fall from Jesus' head. The looks of awe beam freshly in the eyes of the people who've just heard a voice from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." The gasps and whispers and excited conversations about the Spirit's dove-like presence resting on Jesus fill the air on the banks of the Jordan, as the crowds who witnessed Jesus' baptism prepare themselves for what will come next. Coming up out of the water and into affirmation of his identity as God's Son, Jesus is surely about to begin his reign of power and authority. Can't you feel the excitement about what will come for Jesus and for God's people? Maybe this one who is God's beloved will do something special now for the people of God.

But scripture tells us that with his body damp and his hair still dripping from coming up out of the waters, Jesus is led up into the wilderness. He is not led up to a throne of prominence. He is not led up to a seat of authority. He is led up into the wilderness—a place of wandering, and trial, and temptation, and need—and there he fasts for 40 days and 40 nights. Jesus, like his people throughout the generations, goes through the waters of restoration, redemption, and release and encounters the challenge of the wilderness.

You remember the journey of God's people out of Egypt. When Pharaoh finally let God's people go, they came to the waters and eventually traveled through them before entering a wilderness land. They followed God through the sea and into the wilderness. And in that wilderness, God's people wandered for 40 years. The journey to the land that God had promised could have been, perhaps should have been, much shorter. Yet because of the people's failures and unfaithfulness, because of their quarrelling and testing of God, their journey to the promised land spanned more than a generation. In the wilderness the people complained, fed on bread from heaven, turned to idols, turned back to God, trusted their leaders and doubted them. The wilderness was full of periods of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. So God's people knew what it was like to be led through waters of affirmation and into wilderness land.

Through his 40-day fast in the wilderness, Jesus symbolically re-enacts the journey of God's people. And through his fast, he alligns with God's prophets and leaders before—like Moses and Elijah—who also fasted for 40 days prior receiving instruction or commission from God. Jesus is thoroughly part of God's continued faithful presence for and with the people of Israel. And like God's people before him, Jesus travels the road of freedom and life with God that leads him to the wilderness.

Like God's people before us, we too travel the road that leads to the wilderness. I suspect you've encountered wilderness experiences in your life. Coming up from the waters of blessing and affirmation, your journey unexpectedly takes you up—not to the mountaintop or the high places you expected—but into the wilderness. Maybe your wilderness times have come right when you least expected them: after you crushed your mid-term; after you finally were able to retire; after a new relationship began; after you reconciled with a long-estranged friend; after your child was born; after you finally got the promotion; after you kicked the habit that had been harming you for so long. And after these good and blessed things, you encountered a place of challenge and trial and barrenness. You too know what it is like to journey into the wilderness.

And if the wilderness itself were not a challenge enough, the nearly starving Jesus comes face to face with the tempter. This wilderness journey is not a safe one. Jesus' journey is marked by temptation. His temptations are absolutely common and yet absolutely particular. It's as if the tempter is working from a playbook that impacts all of humanity, but that is designed especially for this encounter with Jesus. Jesus is tempted 3 times: once related to provision; once related to prominence; and once related to power. Provision. Prominence. Power.

Jesus is hungry. He is needy. He is human. The scriptures tell us that the devil—the tempter, the accuser, Satan—comes to Jesus in his time of need and presses in on him. “You are the Son of God, aren't you? So do something about your need. Provide for yourself.” Of course, there is no fault in Jesus being hungry, and there is nothing wrong with satisfying that need for provision by eating. But Jesus smells the trap of this temptation. He recognizes where the path created by trusting in one's own devices eventually leads, and how, even in this moment, satisfying a very natural and human need would develop a habit of misdirected trust.

The tempter moves from the need for provision to the desire for prominence. Like being hungry, there is nothing wrong with Jesus being known for who he is. But there is something about needing prominence, or prestige, or popularity to ensure the truth of one's identity that temptingly leads to harm instead of health. So the tempter leads Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple. They can see the people gathering and entering. This is surely an opportunity for God's people to see who Jesus really is—for Jesus to be known as God's Son. The evil one says, “Jesus, you've heard the voice from heaven announce you as the Son of God, so make a show of it. Put your actions where your words are. Cast yourself from here, so everyone can see the LORD work on your behalf. Afterall, the scriptures say, ‘God will command God's angels concerning you, so you won't even dash your foot against a stone.’ After this spectacle everyone will recognize you as God's Son.”

\*\*\*As an aside, isn't it clever how the tempter uses a shallow—if not literalistic—reading of scripture to try to trip Jesus up? Perhaps a shallow reading of scripture is ripe for use in tempting people toward false action and belief. Perhaps such a use of scripture even happens among us today, causing harm for God's people and for those who do not yet know God. It is no doubt a prayer required, and Spirit inspired task to hear the word of God through the scriptures rather than hearing the word of temptation. But I digress.\*\*\*

For a third time, the devil plays on Jesus' natural and good inclinations in an effort to lead him astray. This time the tempter attacks Jesus' commitment to care for and guide all the kingdoms and peoples of the world. Jesus surely knows that with power in his hands, he can accomplish the good he dreams of and is destined to impact for the world. Accumulating, mobilizing, and utilizing power is how things seem to get done in this world afterall, so if Jesus wants good to come, why not have all the power given to him? So again, the tempter comes saying, “I'll give you all the kingdoms you can see from this high mountain place. Just a little compromise is all I ask. Wouldn't you be willing to do anything to accomplish the good, to have your reign, to be in power? Look at all you could accomplish if you just bow to me, even for a moment.”

Jesus' temptations are temptations common to humanity. Temptations connected to provision and prominence and power impact us all. It is important to recognize that provision, prominence, and power are not wrong in themselves. Afterall, it is not wrong to want your needs to be provided for—to have food security and housing stability and good health. It is not wrong to want to be known for who you are or to desire the kind of prominence that would allow you to live

into who and what God has called you to be. And it is not wrong to want to be able to impact the world for good—to have the power to stop gun-violence and murders in Durham, to have the power to ensure living-wage jobs for everyone to work, to have the power to provide quality education to all our children. Yet the story of Jesus’ temptation reminds us that these good ends must come by right and good means. The great temptation for us is to turn away from a deep trust in God that is the means to these good ends. The tempter desires to wreak havoc on God’s good world and God’s good plans for individuals and communities and all the earth. So the tempter offers alternatives to trusting God because choosing lesser means will eventually result in lesser ends that do not give glory, honor, or praise to God. Ultimately these alternative means and ends diminish our connection with and the worship of God.

So we are tempted to trust in our own ability to provide for ourselves—make these rocks into bread. And we are tempted to test God’s promises (even simplistic understandings of those promises) to prove our own worth—do this dramatic act, so everyone can witness God taking care of you. And we are tempted to vie for and accumulate power at any cost, perhaps compromising with evil in order to achieve what we want and in effect making a deal with the devil. In doing this, we betray our trust in and upon God for a trust in more immediate, expedient, or visible options—just bow down to me, and I will give you all these kingdoms.

With all this talk of temptation, we may have forgotten a critical component of Jesus’ wilderness temptation story. Jesus didn’t simply decide for himself to go into the wilderness, and though no other person was with him, he was not alone. What we must remember is the presence and activity of the Spirit in the wilderness with Jesus. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, but the Spirit does not leave him at the time of his temptation. By the grace and power of the Spirit, Jesus plants his feet on the solid ground of trust in God. By the grace and power of the Spirit, Jesus remembers the story of his people and allows the scriptures to speak rightly and truthfully in opposition to the devil’s false use of the same. Three times Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy, remembering God’s faithfulness and promises and commands to God’s people as they were on their wilderness journey. By the grace and power of the Spirit, Jesus has the assurance of his identity in God’s declaration without needing to put God on trial. And by the grace and power of the Spirit, Jesus has the ability to trust and the courage to walk in God’s will and way, in God’s reign and rule, which is to say in God’s kingdom. And in all of this, by the grace and power of the Spirit, Jesus worships God alone.

The Spirit did not leave Jesus alone in his time of trial, and the Spirit will not leave us alone either. The Resource present with Jesus is also present with and in us. In our baptisms and by God’s grace, we receive the Spirit—the Spirit that journeys with us in all our wilderness wanderings, in all our times of trial and temptation, in all our lives. It is good news that the Spirit is present for us and with us when we are tempted to think we have to trust in our own abilities and strengths. It is good news that the Spirit is present for us and with us when we are tempted to believe we need to prove our identity and worth as God’s children by achieving prominence, gaining popularity, or acquiring prestige. It is good news that the Spirit is present for us and with us when scriptures are glibly used for harm instead of for faithfulness. It is good news that the Spirit is present for us and with us when we feel compelled to compromise with evil for expedience sake even if to achieve something good, ultimately betraying our worship of God. This is all good news because it means the trials and temptations we experience do not need to finally trip us up or make

us fall. By the grace and the power of the Spirit, we are enabled to be rooted in a deep trust of God and God's good ways in the world that allows us not to succumb to temptation.

Jesus walks the wilderness way and passes through the time of trial and temptation, and God's angels come to wait on Jesus—providing for him the necessities of life. Eventually Satan flees, and God's promises are made sure. Jesus remains rooted and grounded in his trust of God, and God shows up to provide what he needs. The God who was proven trustworthy by providing for the people of Israel in the wilderness, proves God's self to be trustworthy again in the wilderness for Jesus. And this same God will prove to be trustworthy for you and for me in and through our times of trial and temptation. I leave you this morning with this exhortation from Proverbs chapter 3 that is rooted and grounded in God's faithfulness and is enabled by the Spirit's presence with and in you.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and do not rely on your own insight.

In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.

Do not be wise in your own eyes;  
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.

It will be a healing for your flesh  
and a refreshment for your body.