



March 1, 2020
First Sunday in Lent
Matthew 4:1-11;

Psalm 139:1-14, 17-18, 23-24

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Known by Heart

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness always begins our season of Lent. Before our next reading, a bit more on that text. In Lent, we try to live more centered in the Sacred, full with Holy Love. To get there, first, we awaken to what separates us from God and God's way for the world. Vain diversions, twisted temptations. Matthew tells us Jesus experiences those struggles too, as he seeks his truest self. He's just been baptized—a beloved son of God. Which means Holy Love is his deepest source of life. And he's fully human. He still feels desires and faces choices we do. His life was far from a simple and easy. He's real. Before he begins ministry, we glimpse his heart, his conscience, thoughts, emotions, depths of his being and orientation. Matthew tries to say: this character guides him through all that is to come.

We know the gospel story. Been down this road. And maybe, in a way, we're always meeting Jesus again for the first time. Matthew writes for Jewish people, convincing them to trust this guy when in the next scene, he'll say: follow me. They know their great lineage of faith. Bible stories of people's ethical challenges—from Adam / Eve, through Sarah and Hagar, to David, Job, the prophets. The great lineage continues in them, as they live faith in ancient Palestine under the power of Rome. Forty days and nights, Matthew says. Like Noah's days of flood, like Exodus years in the wilderness, like Moses up on the wilderness mountain with God. You see, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is the new Moses. He fled as a refugee into Egypt. Now he's on his own Exodus before entering the Promised Land. Before his

ministry proclaiming God's reign, urging people to be citizens of that heavenly commonwealth even as they inhabit the kingdom of Herod and Caesar.

It's risky, no walk in the park. Satan / the devil personifies resistance Jesus faces, inside and out. It's like Hamlet's soliloquy—"to be or not to be." Or hero stories in myths or movies getting ready for the big quest, test, climax. Friends, maybe it helps, to picture a red dude with horns, pitchfork (thanks John Milton and Hollywood). A little whisperer on our shoulder. That's not Matthew. His word really means: the accuser. The whole idea evolved imaginatively in Hebrew history from something like the best prosecuting attorney for the Divine Court, to a more direct adversary, deceiver, misleader, manipulator against God's purposes by Jesus' day. Eventually it's a fallen angel. Anyway, whatever literary or literalist interpretations over the years ... it's all our way to convey struggles, temptations we all face in living with Sacred Grace, Holy Love, Divine Purpose in all things.

Again, this week, I read many ways people interpret Jesus' temptations and connect them with us. All about power in some way. Or variations on trusting God to be God and not taking God's place. Particular fears of or desires for hunger, safety, control / domination. Lessons learned include: our deepest life comes not in material things. Life arises when we trust more than cynically test. Serve God humbly seeking God's ways alone. We could go on. All good, helpful insights, connections, faithful interpretation of a living word, not limited to one absolute truth.

Here's the thing that's really struck and stuck with me over the years. In fact, Jesus will do every task he refuses as temptations. Miracles of bread to feed thousands. Healing others' wounds and ailments, preserving their lives, before crying out to God in Gethsemane about his own life. Crowned a king with thorns by rulers of the known world in all their splendor. So, what's the difference? It's about centering in the Sacred, not himself. No motive for selfish gain / pursuing his own success,

rather sacrificial giving, pouring out all he has and is in loving service to others, to the Holy among us all.

Facing each temptation, Jesus quotes scripture he seems to know by heart. Words, principles, priorities, values, beliefs I imagine so deeply embedded they arise, they get revealed with the confidence of holy peace. As much as he quotes Deuteronomy, I imagine Psalm 139 resounds in heart and mind in that moment, as perhaps all along his way to come, even unto the cross ahead of us in this season. Hear what the Spirit may say. It's my translation / interpretation, in part based on the NRSV.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit and when I rise;

you fathom my thoughts from afar.

You analyze my path, assess my dwelling place,

and are acquainted with all my ways.

For there is no word on my tongue,

but that You O Lord, know it completely.

Behind and before me, you enfold me, you shape me,

you put your palm upon me.

Such knowledge is too wondrous for me;

a mystery so high, so hidden – I cannot fathom it.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where from before You flee?

If I soar to the heavens, you are there;

if I bed down in Sheol, you are there.

If I take wing with the sun at dawn

and then settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

your right hand shall seize and hold me.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cloak and conceal me,
and the light around me become cover of night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for dark and light are as one for you.

You formed my innermost parts, body and spirit;
you wove me in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am awesomely, wondrously formed.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know so deeply, intimately.
How weighty your thoughts seem to me, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
Should I count them—they would number more than sand;
I come to the end, I awake—I am still with you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
probe me, test me, know my thoughts.
See if there exist vexing ways in me,
and lead me in the eternal, everlasting way.

As we begin Lent, friends, this psalm captures the intent of disciplines we may adopt. It could be a prayer we say every day. Search me, know me by heart, O God. Know my temptations. Awaken me to selfish inclinations that don't truly satisfy; misdeeds that abuse community and creation. Guide my will, my deepest desires and orientation.

As we read on Ash Wednesday, Jesus said: where our treasures are there our hearts will be also. What nourishes us? What do we seek most? To what do we give our heart? Material things, like bread? Special spiritual truth or privileged status? Power in this world? What will guide our will, our decisions and actions, and be revealed. For here's the truth that the temptations, the psalm, and the season of Lent are all about. What's on the inside will show on the outside. Yes, others see us, assess us by our choices and their consequences. And God sees through it all to know us by heart. All that's best and all the imperfections. The real me and real you on the outside and the inside.

Whatever disciplines we're doing during Lent to know God by heart, they have to be honest, friends. The psalmist imagines God as a person we can't fool—dawn to dusk, daylight and dark, the farthest reaches of the known universe—God always with us. Maybe picture Jesus. Or if the personified metaphor for God doesn't work, then maybe imagine the ground of all being to which a kind of Divine Gravity of Love keeps us rooted. Basic elements that make up our bodies, same as sand and soil between our toes, sparking like stardust between us in the chemistry of laughter, questions and insights. Or maybe we know God as a Spirit, conscience, a longing desire, vital energy and inspiration that pulses inside us with every heartbeat, regulated and made stronger like a pacemaker by hugs from family, smiles from friends, and encouraging words from colleagues.

Whatever conception of relationship with God works for us, nurture it, welcome it, trust it, give our hearts to it. Whatever practices we've chosen to pursue for Lent, I hope we've chosen something—prayer? Reading? Time to spend kindling friendly relationships? A way to express holy creativity inside us? Know that in Divine Love we are embraced as we are. We're enfolded in Sacred Grace and Mercy amid all our imperfections. The Holy One knows the smallest details that concern or excite us, our most hidden secrets, our deepest desires. Searching, testing, probing not for

punishment or guilt or shame rather to be shepherded, nurtured, guided, raised to new life. Here's the good news: as we awaken to that presence beside us, that power within us, that purpose among us we'll awaken our truest, most beautiful selves.

So, let's get real. Me, you, Jesus in whatever testing wilderness we might find ourselves at this moment. Friends, when we come through those big red doors, and we when we leave again, struggle is part of the narrow gate to faith and abundant life. It's like a dance partner with joy and peace and all that is best—impossible to know fully without difficulty and struggle. You know, when we chat, I don't have all answers, perfect knowledge of God, flawless behavior. If I have anything to offer, it's because I've struggled like you. Like Jesus with temptations, knowing by experience what human life is like. That's why we can relate with him. As we continue to journey with him to the cross, that's what we'll face with the other disciples as we try to know God more fully ... by heart.

So much about the Sacred Source and Sustainer of All Life remains mystery. Like a dream. In Lent let's invest in the quest to be more awake. One discipline I've begun is daily reading through all the psalms. I notice already how almost every one dances between lament, appeal, and praise. So, yes, Lent is a time for lament—what should I have done, what did I do detrimental to me or others. Still, don't be filled with fear and guilt, demeaning, beating up the one in the mirror. Be real, with hope—full of honesty, humility, hungry for the love, the life that truly nourishes us like the bread at this table, the presence of Christ in our lives.

How weighty your thoughts seem to me, O God!

How vast is the sum of them!

Should I count them—they would number more than sand;

I come to the end, I awake—I am still with you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
probe me, test me, know my thoughts.
See if there exist vexing ways in me,
and lead me in the eternal, everlasting way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.