

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 4:1-11

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Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil.
He fasted forty days and forty nights,
and afterwards he was famished.

The tempter came and said to him,
"If you are the Son of God,
command these stones to become loaves of bread."
But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

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.'"
Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

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."
Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan!
for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him.
And angels came and waited on him.

The episodic structure of this story is easy to identify: introduction, three temptations, and conclusion.

The verbal threads in this story are also easy to identify. "If you are the Son of God" is the first phrase of the first two statements of Satan to Jesus and Jesus' first and second responses are "it is written." This phrase is the introduction to the first two of Jesus' speeches; in the third the intro is "Away with you, Satan, for it is written." "It is written" is then a major verbal thread that occurs in the last sentence of each of the three temptation episodes.

The first two speeches of the tempter begin with the phrase "if you're the Son of God;" the last one is simply "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." The implication is that the tempter gives up on the Son of God question. Another dynamic created by these verbal threads occurs in the second response of the devil. In response to Jesus' statement, "It is written" followed by a quotation from Deuteronomy, the tempter also says "it is written," and quotes scripture to Jesus. When that doesn't

work, he quickly gives up the quotation of Scripture and says "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." These may be helpful connections for remembering this story.

A basic characteristic of this story is that this is all happening in Jesus' mind and spirit. The entire story is an "inside view" of what is happening in Jesus' meditations in the wilderness. It is important to convey this meditative character of the story in the manner in which you tell it. It might be told sitting in a lotus position or in a chair meditating. Another possibility is to tell the introductory and concluding episodes standing and to sit for the three episodes of the temptations. You will find the best way of telling the story by experimenting with different possibilities in the space in which you are going to tell the story.

The devil is a tester; warm, winning, and thoughtful. It is almost as if he is consoling Jesus and giving him comfort after the forty day fast. His tone is in the storytelling tradition of the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3). The devil's tone is nice; he is trying to help Jesus out in the midst of his fasting.

Jesus' response is as one who is in real turmoil. This is a spiritual struggle, so it is important to convey that these words do not come easily. Jesus' source of strength in this test is what he remembers from the Scriptures. He remembers what is written. In this moment of temptation, Jesus draws on his rock solid memory of the stories that he knew from the traditions of Israel. Jesus' memory of the stories he knew about God by heart enables him to pass these tests and to overcome these temptations. Nevertheless, the telling of the story needs to convey the tension of the moment and how tempting and attractive these options were that the devil laid out before him. One suggestion is to pause before Jesus' responses as he ponders his options.

Specifically, the temptation to turn the stones into bread is the temptation to use his power as the Son of God to meet his own personal needs for food. The temptation of throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the temple is probably a reference to the corner of the Temple mount that overlooked the Kidron valley. It was the temptation to use his power as Son of God to amaze people by his powers as an ancient Superman. The temptation of the kingdoms of the world is related to the temptation to be like Caesar and rule a global empire.

This story is virtually a mandate for the importance of learning the Scriptures by heart. Jesus' internal strength comes from his deeply internalized memory of the stories of God in the traditions of Israel. That is equally true for each of us now. A primary resource for living through the tests and trials of life faithfully is the interiorization of the Scriptures.