

“Living the Life: True or False”
Matthew 4:1-11

Today we begin a new sermon series for the season of Lent. Our focus will be on “Living the Life” which God has intended for us to live. Normally “Living the Life” according to popular culture is about having power, money, good looks, youth, and a lot of affection and admiration. This illusion is even more intensified by social media. Here is a video about pretending to live that life which popular culture promises to bring us happiness. (FOMO for second service). It is called “Are You Living an Insta Lie?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EFHbruKEmw>

What do you see in this? How does it relate to our daily experiences? Why do we do this? What does it do to our souls? Another variation on the same theme are the travel brochures or pictures about famous destinations. The way the advertisers present them to us is supposed to entice us to travel to these destinations. But the reality does not always match the pictures. Here are some travel pictures versus the reality: <https://www.boredpanda.com/travel-expectations-vs-reality/>.

These contradictions are often reflections of our inner realities. We might think of ourselves in certain ways that are not based in our own realities. We try to pursue certain things that promise us happiness, but in reality, we struggle even when these things become ours. Unless we deal with our inner struggles and false assumptions and expectations, we would never find inner peace. Thomas Merton and other Christian writers and teachers talk about this in the language of true and false self. The true self is the image of God within us where the Spirit of God resides and where we say yes to God and the gifts of God’s love for us. The false self is what distorts that image of God within us. It is the self we develop to help shield us from the pain of life or to help us attain the cultural successes we are promised through power, security, and esteem. It is the part of ourselves that is never truly satisfied, that is always insisting on our own way, that takes offense when criticized, that is always pretending to be strong, and that is always striving for more. Here is a simple list that I found from Pastor Pete Scazzero about the false self (Slide):

1. I am reluctant to admit my weaknesses and flaws to others.
2. I look for the approval of others more than I should
3. I am highly “offendable” and defensive when people criticize me (or disagree with me).
4. I often become harsh and impatient when things are moving too slowly or my expectations are not met.
5. I say “yes’ when I would rather say “no”.
6. I beat myself up when I make mistakes.
7. I have difficulty speaking up when I disagree or prefer something different.
8. I have a number of people I am struggling to forgive (especially when things don’t go my way).
9. My fears often cause me to play it safe “just in case.”
10. My body is more often in a state of tension and stress than relaxed.

Jesus' journey into the wilderness was all about facing the demons of the false self and the popular culture's expectations of success and happiness. After his baptism, Jesus went into an intense time in the wilderness alone to be tested. He had a lot going on. He had a mission to accomplish. He had people to save. He had a lot riding on his ministry, and instead of jumping into active ministry, Jesus took the time for intense prayer and fasting. After declaring to the world that he was the one to bring a new way of reform for his people, he was led by the Spirit to do his inner work. (read Matthew 4:1-11) As a side note, it is important for our understanding of the story to look at the meaning of the word "Satan" in the text. Whenever the word Satan or devil appears, we are trained through popular culture to think of evil and the powers of evil in the world. But in the biblical tradition, the role of Satan ("Ha Satan" in Hebrew) was that of an adversary or a tempter. He was seen as part of God's court who had the function of making sure that all perspectives are represented or at least that the other side of the argument is considered. So "the adversary" is more of a role than a name. One biblical scholar puts this way, "The *satan* is an ally of God who tests the Creation to determine its soundness, a cosmic building inspector who enforces the Universal Building Code. In later stories and later religious imagination, the *satan* becomes Satan, the enemy of God, Creation, and all that is good and life-giving. The figure who appears in Matthew's story is somewhere in between." I think that this is an important piece for us as we consider the story because it is easy to see Jesus rejecting the temptations of the Satan if it was clear to him that he was facing the "devil." But if we are true to the text and its context, then we can see that the struggles and temptations of Jesus were more subtle which is more true to life for all of us. We are rarely faced with choices that are clearly evil. Our struggles and temptations are often subtle or seem innocuous.

If we look carefully at the details of Jesus' time of temptation in the wilderness, we would see how it related to the rest of his ministry. It was a foundational experience for how he would resist these temptations over and over again in order to live out what he was called to do as God's beloved in the world. The false self with all its allure had to be confronted and transformed. The story of these temptations takes us directly to the heart and essence of the message and vision of Jesus for the world. It also shows us that being a follower of Jesus requires that we face our temptations and struggles with intentional time of prayer in our own wilderness and how we can allow the Spirit of God to transform us.

The people during the time of Jesus were living under the powers of Rome and its puppet local leadership who were oppressing them. The majority of the people were living under an incredible burden of debt and poverty with a heavy taxation system. They were praying for the Messiah to come and deliver them from their suffering. But the salvation which Jesus was bringing to the people was not about changing one system of government with another. It was about changing their hearts and their whole way of life.

The three temptations which Jesus faced reflect the struggles of most leaders and even most people in the world. That is why it was important to show that Jesus rejected them

because his way to peace and redemption was through changing the human heart. The root causes of our problems in the world are not the ways we organize our governments or societies. A lot of the social evils we struggle against start inside of us and unless we let the Spirit to transform us, there will never be real and lasting changes in our world.

Let's walk through the temptations of Jesus and see how they relate to the false self.

First Temptation of the False Self: Security and Survival. The first temptation is that of hunger. Let's think how this is about the false self and the need for security. Food and hunger are God's gifts to our bodies. There is nothing bad about eating. But if you recall that the issue of bread was a tough one for the people of Israel in the wilderness. After they left their slavery in Egypt, they had to learn to depend on God for their daily rations of food. They left an economy of food hoarding and storing to an economy that only provided enough for a day. They were used to the ways of the empire which were built on exploitation, cheap or slave labor, and food monopoly. They had to unlearn all of this during their time in the wilderness. They had to learn a different kind of economy. Jesus was faced with hunger in the wilderness as part of his fasting and here the adversary was reminding him that he could have the bread that he needed, if he chose to. But Jesus resisted the temptation because he wanted to have a true fast where food and survival would not have power over him. His way was alternative to the economies and powers of the empires of the world where satisfying our basic needs can often lead us to hoard and to fight wars over natural resources. We can say that the first temptation is about security and our need for survival which often leads people to violate and exploit others. Look at the economics of our world and how they are set up to advantage certain groups at the expense of others.

Second Temptation of the False Self: Power and Control. The second temptation is that of asking God for special protection and favor. Let's think of how this temptation is about the false self and power. From the world's perspective of power, the Son of God should have special religious privileges! He should be able to be "super human" and be shielded from any pain. He should have the blessing and power of the gods! But that is not so from the perspective of Jesus. The location of the story is important. This was the view of temple of the holy city. This was the place of religious power. It is interesting to see Jesus respond with words from Deuteronomy 6:16: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." These words were spoken to the people of Israel at Meribah about the time they tested God. Again, this was during their time in the wilderness and there was no water for them to drink. That is where Moses struck the rock to get water from it Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" (Exodus 17: 6-7) Jesus was aware of how empires and people in power believed that God was on their side and that God was seen as blessing their causes and their empires. In presenting an alternative vision for the world, Jesus was showing that his way was about trust and not about a sense of entitlement and privilege. The false self's need for power can be healed and transformed through learning to trust.

Third Temptation of the False Self: Esteem. The third temptation is that of esteem. Let's think of how this temptation is about affection and esteem. Emperors and kings showed that they were worthy of adoration and affection based on their ability to have power and accomplishments. That was (and still is!) the model for success and

prosperity. The accolade and esteem were sometimes turned into worship. The king or emperor was seen as divine and deserving of adoration because he had so much power or brought prosperity to the land. This was the model for supposedly doing the most good in the world. The whole time (forty years) for the people of Israel's experience in the wilderness was about God shaping them in ways that were alternative to the kingdoms of the world. The Law that was given to them through Moses was about creating a society that practiced its faith in all aspects of life including economic and social practices such as: providing opportunities for all (land for each household), taking care of the vulnerable, not allowing exploitation (such as charging interest on loans), practicing regular forgiveness of debts and slaves (every seven years), and every fifty years returning the land to its original owners if they had fallen on hard times and lost their land. This worked for a while under the rule of judges, but then the people wanted to be like the other nations to have a king and a centralized army. When the people of Israel wanted a king, there was a stern warning to them from God about kings and their abuse of power (1 Samuel 8). And the system was set up where the prophets would hold the king accountable to the service of the Law of God. By resisting this temptation, Jesus gave his people a clear alternative to the models of domination in the world. He knew that these models of domination often become idols for us as human beings and move us away from the true worship of God. Our loyalty should always be to God.

So as we look at the example and way of Jesus, we are invited to be intentional about our time with God during Lent to be led by the Spirit into our own wildernesses to allow God to lovingly Jesus gives us a vision for what is possible even when all the powers of the world seem so right and so set in their place. He also shows us the importance of taking the time to be intentional about facing the temptations of security, power, and affection in our own hearts.

How do we go about this? How do we follow in the footsteps of Jesus in the wilderness? During this holy season of Lent, we are invited to try together (there is strength in numbers) each week a practice that will help us open ourselves to God. These practices are adapted from Heidi Haverkamp's book *Holy Solitude*. This week's practice is about thirst. We are invited and challenged to take one day (or afternoon) to drink only water. Each time you crave something else, take a moment to ask: "What am I truly thirsting for in my life right now?"

I will end with a reading from Psalm 63 that I hope will help you begin to reflect on what your soul is thirsty for right now. This will serve as our preparation to come to the table of Christ where our hunger and thirst for God's presence are satisfied and we are reminded of who we truly are in this life.

God—you're my God!

I can't get enough of you!

I've worked up such hunger and thirst for God,
traveling across dry and weary deserts.

²⁻⁴ So here I am in the place of worship, eyes open,
drinking in your strength and glory.

In your generous love I am really living at last!
My lips brim praises like fountains.
I bless you every time I take a breath;
My arms wave like banners of praise to you. Amen.

