

“Christ In Between”
Matthew 4:1-11
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Today we are celebrating the graduates in our midst. You’ve accomplished more than a piece of paper could ever convey. You’ve worked very hard, often over many years, to reach a goal and you’ve seen God’s grace and joy. Walking across that stage was a monumental moment, perhaps even a defining moment. But after every ‘congrats’ comes the inevitable next question: *What’s next for you?* It’s wonderful when we have a confident response, but sometimes we don’t and the idea of graduating becomes daunting.

We go through countless seasons of transition in our lives and although transitions are common, it doesn’t mean they’re easy or get any easier. An infant learns to self-soothe, a child enters school, a youth may leave home, a young adult begins to work, then entering a new job, new friendships, starting a family, moving to a new place, divorce or death in family and illness. Transitions happen not only in our own personal lives but in our community’s life and in the church as well. RPC has been going through a season of transition – yes, between ministers, but also discerning how God is calling this community to be love, serve and be present in the next season.

The in-between time when you’ve finished one thing but haven’t quite arrived at the next – that is what we’ll be talking about today. How do we navigate that time well? What might God be inviting us into in the ‘I don’t know yet’? We saw this in the Israelites when they were in the wilderness for 40 years, no longer in the familiarity of Egypt and not yet in the Promised Land. And a parallel story comes from today’s Scripture reading with Jesus fasting in the wilderness for 40 days. Let’s see how Jesus walks through the wilderness faithfully as a model for us.

In Matthew 3, Jesus had an extraordinary moment and a grand inauguration to his ministry with baptism. The heavens opened up, the Spirit came down like a dove, God’s audible voice saying *“This is my son with whom I am well pleased.”* This is a clear announcement for the beginning of the Son of God’s ministry. It’s like a graduation for Jesus!

So it's interesting to see that the very first thing after this grand event is that the Spirit leads him out into the desert to be tempted by the devil. The same Spirit that came down like a dove upon Jesus at his baptism is the same Spirit that led him out to the wilderness. God's intentional plan was the temptation (also translated as 'testing'). Jesus fasted for 40 days to prepare himself for his public ministry through this extended time of communion with his Father. God wanted the testing to reveal something about the one being tested.

We can think that the challenging wilderness of in-between is a time that is useless, wasted, mistaken or even shameful. Our goal is to get it over with as fast as we can! But with nothing distracting us or holding us back, it can be a time when God has our full attention and we can wholeheartedly give ourselves to him. Although it may not seem it on the outside, a deep transformative work is happening from our foundation up.

Henri Nouwen was a priest and a brilliant professor, theologian, scholar and prolific writer. Nouwen left behind twenty years of teaching pastoral psychology and theology at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard in order to be a live-in minister at L'Arche Daybreak, a community for the developmentally disabled just north of Toronto. In his book *In the Name of Jesus*, he says that the devil focuses our attention elsewhere, on temptations that many of us may think are good things. The three temptations for Jesus and for us are to be relevant, to be spectacular and to be powerful.

Test 1: Temptation to be Relevant

3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

On a trip to Israel some years back, I was astonished that the picture of the wilderness I had in my mind was not what it actually looked like. The ground was littered with rocks and I couldn't take a step without stepping on a stone! The miracle wouldn't have been only to end his own hunger, but the hunger of many through miraculous means. Jesus could have ended world hunger by turning these stones to bread! But he would have had to go beyond the reality of Christ's full humanness.

The first test is a temptation to be relevant - to do things, show things, prove my value, build things that demonstrate the ability to make a difference in ppl's lives, to be relevant to the need/hunger in our world. We all want to be useful and purposeful. We want our churches to be so attractive because we can do things for others. But there is an incredible amount of pressure for religious communities to do good things.

This is a great thing! Richmond should be glad RPC is here and the city would feel an impact if this church were to close its doors today. The temptation comes when our value and existence is founded on the fear that we must be relevant in our neighborhood, to our friends, coworkers and family members instead of depending on every word that comes from the mouth of God. We find ourselves burnt out and lost following that path.

Test 2: Temptation to be Spectacular

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down."

Satan takes Jesus to the center of the religious community, the temple in Jerusalem, and tells him to jump off, trusting that God will save him. The second test is the temptation to be spectacular and to do something that will win great applause and popularity. Satan tells Jesus, *"God's got your back, so do whatever you want!"* The tempter is robbing us of the good work God is doing by telling us to show it off to the world and to become the centre of attention. He speaks to our hidden motivation to follow and serve God because we're secretly more excited about the praise we'll receive. While work for God, we're actually working for ourselves.

Test 3: Temptation to be powerful

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

The third test is the temptation to be powerful and use political, economic, spiritual, and even military or physical might as instruments for establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. In all three temptations, Satan is testing:

- Jesus' identity – *Are you sure God is your Father? For you? In your corner?*
- Jesus' character and integrity – *No one will know if you cut corners and transcend the laws of nature, think of what you'll get!*
- Jesus' motivation – *You deserve this, you're the Son of God! Entitled to this!*

Yet we're not tested because God wants us to fail and to condemn us, but because God wants to reveal and then set us free from the things that enslave us, even the good things like the admiration of others.

The purpose of testing in the wilderness is to expose those hidden motivations. In T.S. Elliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, a bishop that did all the right Christian things said this:

*Now is my way clear; now is the meaning plain:
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason. ...
For those who serve the greater cause
Make the cause serve them.*

Ron Rolheiser explains it this way: *"There are many motives for why we want to be good, but the one that disguises itself as a grace and is really a negative temptation is this one: be good because of the respect, admiration, and permanent good name it will win you, for the genuine glory that this brings. This is the temptation faced by a good person. Wanting a good name is not a bad thing, but in the end it's still about ourselves."*

JESUS' RESPONSES

But we can always go to Jesus to show us the way to respond to these temptations.

Response 1: To the temptation of relevance, Jesus depends on God's promises

4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

God's words are food that even bread after a 40-day fast can't beat. Jesus knew that God's words are the essence of who God is and those words are infinitely more relevant than our works and they are covenant promises that will not be broken. God is inviting us to trust in his relevance to his creation over our own ability to be relevant to ourselves and others. We can trust that God is enough and will provide without our fear

– God's saving work is in and through us. In his word, God says he is coming for his creation, God is doing a new thing, God will never let the enemy overcome the church and the kingdom is near and here. We have an unparalleled privilege to anyone else in history to know exactly what God is saying through the words written in the Scriptures

Response 2: To the temptation of spectacular, Jesus trusts in God and his ways

7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Jesus sees the devil's game and says he won't test God just to prove that He is who He truly is - God's Son. Jesus already knows his most spectacular act while on earth will be the cross, leaving it up to God to bring him from death back to life and glorify him. Jesus' glory is to love us and, in that love, to sacrifice himself for our sake so that we may have the life that we could never have gotten on our own. Christ didn't seek glory but knew that it belongs to God and God has promised he will share it with those who believe in him on the day when he returns.

Response 3: To the temptation of power, Jesus worships and serves God

alone 10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Jesus chose to keep the first, greatest and only commandment – to love and worship the Lord your God and serve him only. Both worship and serving are acts of giving. You would think if God came to this earth in the form of a human being people would recognize him, worship him and all would be made well. But we know that's not how Jesus' story goes, People had great expectations because of his powerful signs and healings and miracles.

They sought for a political saviour and military leader that would lead the Israelite people to freedom. But he was misunderstood, disregarded and essentially killed because he wasn't what people wanted. Yet that was how God chose to save all creation through Jesus.

We're told that at the end of the testing, the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. No testing lasts forever and in the end God will send angels to fill the needs that you intentionally fasted from and restore you to bear much fruit.

In this season of transition for you as graduates or you as the church: What is God inviting you into? Is it towards greater dependence on God? To learn how to trust God more with your ways? To weed out affections that take away from God's reign in your life? Or to clarify your motivation, vision and calling?

And what does this movement look like in your life? Moving from relevance towards dependence on God, from the spectacular to trusting in God's provision and from seeking power to living a life of worship and service to God alone. From grabbing in your own right to surrendering to God's way and timing, from being about you to being about God and others and from self-sufficiency to relationality. Henri Nouwen says: *"I leave you with the image of the leader with outstretched hands, who chooses a life of downward mobility."*

A final image to help us see the importance of this 'in-between' time is that of developing the photos from an analog camera. The process takes time in a dark room, first exposing a little light onto the photosensitive paper and then dipping paper into multiple chemicals. If the light is exposed during the process, then the photos are ruined. We are too often opening the door and exposing the process of development to light before the work is finished. Will you allow the Spirit to do the work of testing, clarifying and maturing in you?