

WHEN THE DEVIL IS NEAR...

Matthew 4:1-11

God is nearer.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Bud Reeves
First United Methodist Church
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As Americans we live in a culture of celebrity. We think fame and fortune are great things. We take our celebrities very seriously. Entire shows and networks are dedicated to the goings and comings of celebrities. My first encounter with a celebrity was in high school, at the state convention of the National Honor Society in Malvern, Arkansas. My friends and I were stopping by the restroom before the big banquet, and while we were in there, an old man came in, cracking one joke after another. After he left, my friends and I kind of rolled our eyes. Then we went into the banquet, and our featured speaker for the evening was the old man from the restroom. His name was Chester Lauck, a native Arkansan and a world-wide celebrity on radio and in the movies in the 1930's and 40's. He starred as Lum Eddards in a show called "Lum and Abner." And to think I was standing next to him, our shoulders almost touching. As a high school kid, it was exciting to be that close to a real celebrity—close enough to touch. When celebrities are around, that is what people like to do—to get close enough to touch them, shake their hand, get their autograph, or take a selfie.

I wonder what it would have been like to be close enough to touch Jesus when he was alive on earth. I'm sure he was quite a celebrity in his time and his area. People came from miles around to see him. What would it have been like to look into his eyes, to hear the sound of his actual voice, to feel the touch of his hand? That's what we're going to think about this Lenten season with a new sermon series we are calling "CLOSE ENOUGH TO TOUCH." We're going to hear the stories of some of the close, personal, one-on-one encounters that Jesus had with people. We're going to see how these conversations had an impact on the lives of those who were involved. I hope in the process we will have an encounter with the Spirit of the living Christ and feel close enough to touch Jesus in a spiritual way.

Today I want to talk about a unique encounter between Jesus and his adversary, the Devil. There in the wilderness, they were close enough to touch one another, and it was a remarkable conversation. Like two heavyweights showing up for the weigh-in before the fight, they squared off, looked each other in the eye, and issued the challenge. Remember, Jesus had been in the wilderness for forty days with nothing to eat. He was physically tired and near starvation, and that's when the Devil arrived, like he does now. When we're tired

and stressed out and anxious and our defenses are down, that's when temptations arise. That's when Satan shows up.

I don't think I have to make the point with you that sometimes the presence of evil is very real. Sometimes the Devil does seem close enough to touch. Even if you don't take Satan literally, you'd better take him seriously. I Peter warns us about this: "*Discipline yourselves. Keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the Devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.*"¹ Watch yourselves, or you'll get bit!

I read about a guy down in Broward County, Florida, near Miami, who does a great business. He is the only licensed alligator trapper in that county. He removes nuisance alligators from people's property. In one year, he got over 600 calls and actually caught 97 alligators. However, in just the first half of the next year, he received over 1,500 calls and caught 130 alligators. What was going on? The increase in calls came primarily from a planned suburb in Broward County called Weston. The people in this new subdivision were having an awful time with alligators surrounding their brand new million-dollar homes.

Why were the alligators such a problem? Because the developers of Weston had filled in an alligator-infested swamp to build this luxurious suburb. They had destroyed the marshland, so the alligators came up and sunned themselves in the driveways right beside their BMW's. What do you expect? You build your home on top of a swamp, you're going to have to deal with the reptiles.²

It works that way with temptation, too. If you open yourself up to the Devil, he will show up—with an appetite! If you quit praying, if you quit worshipping and studying Scripture, if you let yourself get overly tired or stressed or anxious or upset, if you put yourself in a position where you are surrounded by unholy things, temptation will be strong and as hard to tame as an alligator.

Nobody is immune to temptation. Max Lucado, the famous preacher and speaker and author, has been called "America's Pastor." Whenever there is a national religious gathering, Lucado is usually on the platform. A few years ago, Max admitted that he had been struggling with temptation. He comes from a family of alcoholics, and with his genetic predisposition and background, drinking alcohol has always been off limits for him. But Max Lucado decided to let down his guard a bit, having an occasional beer with his barbecue or Mexican food. (He lives in San Antonio, Texas.) But having a drink with food soon progressed to drinking by itself, then drinking by himself. Then one day Max was on his way to a Christian men's retreat when he began to plot how to go and buy some beer without being seen. He drove to an out-of-the-way convenience store and snuck in and bought his beer and was going to drink it while he drove to his retreat. Suddenly Max realized with conviction what he was doing. It didn't help that he had just given his daughter a talk about not covering things up.

Fortunately, Max Lucado threw the beer away. He went to the elders in his church and confessed to them, and they promised to cover him with prayer, because this one little thing had become a big way for Satan to attack their pastor.³

Personally, I don't care if Max Lucado has a beer with his barbecue; that doesn't diminish his ministry or witness for me. Like so many other things, alcohol is not a problem—unless it's a problem. When alcohol causes a person to become obsessive about drinking, or to act deceptively, or to continually increase his or her drinking behavior, then it's a problem. It's a temptation. It's a sin.

The point is, every one of us has temptations, whether it's alcohol or drugs or sex or gambling or money or career or recreation or pride—we're all tempted in some way. We have those dark nights of the soul when we struggle with our inner demons. We have those wilderness times when we know that evil is real, and the Devil is near enough to touch. In that sense we experience the same temptations Jesus himself did.

Jesus had the **temptation to eat**. After forty days in the wilderness, he was starving. Satan came to him and said, "*If you are the Son of God*"—the first part of temptation is always doubt—"turn these stones into bread." Wouldn't that have been delicious? But Jesus answered, "*It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*"⁴ His hunger was intense, but it was not enough to make him fall.

The temptation to eat is about more than food. It is the temptation to satisfy our desires with temporary solutions. Get the quick fix. We are all into instant gratification, aren't we? Maybe we don't need to turn stones into bread. So we try to turn a stranger into a lover, or a sport into a religion, or things into passions, or people into objects. But life does not come from gratifying our little desires; life comes from the Word of God.

The first temptation having failed, Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and challenged him to throw himself off and let his Father's angels rescue him. The Devil even had a supporting Scripture to back up his plea. This is the **temptation to shine**. This could be Jesus' moment of fame and glory. What a spectacular feat, a 300-foot plunge into the rocky ground, saved at the last second by a rushing horde of angels. Highlights at 10 on Jerusalem News! Who wouldn't be tempted by the recognition such a splashy scene would bring?

I have noticed, however, that most people who achieve fame have to spend the rest of their lives running from it. Marilyn Monroe, Michael Jackson, Prince, Robin Williams—people pay a high price for celebrity. Movie star Jim Carrey said, "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer."⁵

The temptation to shine is about more than fame and celebrity, however. Frankly, most of us don't have to worry about that. But we are all tempted, as Jesus was, to use God to make ourselves look good. It's the desire of pride. "Look at me, how good and faithful I am! God is really on my side." Jesus knew better, so he replied to Satan's second temptation, "*Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord Your God to the test.'*"⁶ No amount of fame or recognition or glory was worth trying to manipulate a divine response from God.

So finally the Devil laid his best offer on the table: Jesus can rule all the kingdoms of the world, if he will just worship the Devil. Swear allegiance to Satan, and the world belongs to you! This, of course, is the **temptation to rule**. Again, the control issue rears its ugly head. Who's going to be in charge here? Is it Satan? Is it God? Is it me? This is the natural human condition. We are hell-bent on being the center of our universe, and we will do anything—even bow down to the Devil—to make it happen.

But not Jesus. He casts out the Devil with this word: "*Away with you, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'*"⁷ Only God rules!

That did it; the Devil went away, the angels came to minister to Jesus, and Christ, as well as Satan, would live to fight another day.

I think this story of the temptation of Jesus has a great message for us today. **When the devil is near, God is nearer.** Let me quickly give you three R's for keeping God near when Satan is nipping at your heels.

First, **remember who you are.** Don't let the Devil put seeds of doubt in your mind about your identity. Remember, you are a child of God.⁸ Remember, you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.⁹ Remember, you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.¹⁰ Don't give in; remember who you are; have integrity within yourself.

Trust and integrity build up over time, but they can be destroyed in a moment. Tod Bolsinger says trust increases like a thermostat and decreases like a light switch.¹¹ You and I both know stories of men and women who worked for years to build a life, to establish a good reputation in business, in the community, or in ministry. Then in a moment they forgot who they were. They fell to temptation, and everything they had worked for, everyone who believed in them, disappeared like a light switch being turned off.

Remember who you are, and **rely on the Word.** Did you notice that Jesus answered every temptation of the Devil with a word of Scripture? All three responses come from the Book of Deuteronomy. To every spiritual challenge, Jesus said, "It is written..." We can, too. The Word of God is the best defense against the schemes of Satan. Scriptures give us strength far beyond the strength of physical food. Read them. Know them.

Remember who you are, rely on his Word, and third, **recognize the Source of power.** Without God, we are powerless over temptation; with God, we have the strength to win the victory. We are not so strong on our own, but the good news is, we are never on our own! As Paul wrote, "*We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and not to us.*"¹² It's not about us, our accomplishments, or our spiritual heroics. It's about God working inside these weak clay jars to proclaim his power. It's about God giving us the strength to resist temptation. It's about living our lives to glorify God. Otherwise, trying to be a good Christian is nothing more than a spiritual ego trip.

If you're a basketball fan, you may remember Paul Westphal. He was a star in the NBA, won an NBA championship, and played in the All-Star game five times. After playing, he went into coaching, first at a Christian college. After a few years, he coached successfully in the NBA, but eventually he went back to the college level. With the college players, he had more of a chance to mold the lives of young men and share his deep Christian faith with them. In *Sports Spectrum* magazine, Paul Westphal shared this bit of wisdom: "Being a Christian is not an ego thing. A lot of people accuse Christians of claiming salvation and then thinking that makes them better than someone else. You know, it's actually just the opposite. We simply know we have a sin problem, and we know who can fix it."¹³

If you are having a problem with sin today, if you are facing a strong temptation, if you are walking through one of those wilderness times in your life, I know who can fix it. Draw near in faith to Jesus Christ, and you will find the Fixer. When you are tempted to think your desires are your life, when you're tempted to find salvation in celebrity, when you think you're in charge of your world, let me tell you what to do. Remember who you are. Rely on God's Word. Recognize the Source of your power. That should fix the problem. When the Devil is near, take heart; God is so much nearer—so near you can touch him.

¹I Peter 5:8.

² Cited by Ed Rowell from an article in *USA Today*, July 24, 2001.

³ Robert Andrescik, "America's Pastor Speaks to Men," *New Man*, January/February 2002, *PreachingToday.com*.

⁴ Matthew 4:4.

⁵ Jim Carrey, "Quotable Quotes," *Readers Digest* (March 2006).

⁶ Matthew 4:7.

⁷ Matthew 4:10.

⁸ I John 3:1-3.

⁹ I Peter 2:10.

¹⁰ Matthew 5:13-15.

¹¹ <https://freshexpressions.com/2022/11/02/why-some-churches-adapt-and-others-do-not-with-tod-bolsinger>.

¹² II Corinthians 4:7.

¹³ Cited by Mike Hermon, *PreachingToday.com*.