

That passage from St. Matthew's Gospel sounds like a folk tale, and not an especially relevant one. All of the characters are supernatural, the structure is highly stylized, and the scenario, seemingly, is far from any the reader might encounter. But before you dig very deeply, you'll see that this story has more to offer us than we might expect.

First, though, some context. This story falls between the baptism of Jesus and his first public acts of ministry. St. Matthew was particularly concerned with continuity and parallels between Jesus and the Old Testament, so Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness would have been an obvious parallel to Israel spending 40 years in the wilderness during the Exodus. This parallel is reinforced in the dialogue, because the passages Jesus quotes are from Deuteronomy — specifically, passages encouraging Israel to stay faithful to God after leaving the austerity of the desert for the abundance of the Promised Land.

In seminary, one of my Old Testament professors impressed on us that the key to understanding the Old Testament is understanding why God loved the desert, or specifically, why God loved Israel's experience in the desert. To that I would add that the better you understand the Old Testament, the better you'll understand the New. But anyway, God loved the desert because that was where God could most intimately be with Israel, God's most beloved nation.

In the desert, Israel could experience the pure, unvarnished reality of their dependence on God, receiving enough manna every morning to feed them for that day only — literally their daily bread. There were no illusions, no distractions, except those of their own making. They had to trust God, and God proved worthy of their trust. God stayed faithful to them, always feeding them, guiding and protecting them, even when they quarreled and grumbled. The experience in the desert felt like an ordeal sometimes, but to God, it was like a honeymoon.

So yes, in today's Gospel, Jesus encounters the devil in the wilderness, not God, so it's not an exact parallel. But Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, so, critically, "the devil's role is subservient to the spirit's intentions."\* Yes, this story is a perfect example of how the devil can use Scripture for his own purposes, but it's also a perfect example of the more profound observation that God can use the devil for God's own purposes. Maybe that's why God keeps him around. And we can hardly say that God is absent from this story because Jesus is God — but once we realize that, the story doesn't exactly hold us in suspense. Even if we were hearing this story for the first time, I don't think any of us would seriously think that Jesus was going to give in. But considering that, we might wonder what the point of the story is.

The story certainly sets up Jesus for his public ministry, but the interesting thing is how. Jesus is presented as being tested with distractions from God, and overcoming them by staying faithful to God, just as the Book of Deuteronomy urged Israel to stay faithful in the midst of the distractions of the Promised Land. And that's

exactly the same challenge all of us face today.

Tallahassee may not always feel like a land of milk and honey, especially in summer or during session, but think about all we take for granted. We can walk into a supermarket and choose from an array of foods far more diverse and appealing than an ancient person could imagine, and buy those foods for amounts that represent far less labor than an ancient person would have had to do to attain them. Our vibrant community offers abundant opportunities for entertainment and recreation that again would be beyond the imagination of the ancients — and if that's not enough, we have fast, affordable travel and the Internet. Our economy offers far more attractive opportunities for earning a living, and while our health care system is far from perfect, again, to the ancients it would be indistinguishable from magic.

And that's the thing about the story of Jesus being tempted. The story uses magic as shorthand for the temptations of every age. Turn those stones into bread. Let the angels catch you. Take all the kingdoms of the world. Anyone who's ever felt hungry, insecure, or powerless would be tempted, and anyone who has had a taste of prosperity, security, or power wants more. This is no silly folk tale, but an exposure of the insidious and corrupting nature of the things that tempt us away from God.

I'm not saying that there's anything inherently bad about wanting, or having, adequate food and security, and some people will always have power of one sort or another. Rather, these things become insidious and corrupting when they tempt us away from our relationship with God. For one thing, God is ultimately our only source of fulfillment, satisfaction, joy and peace, and other things ultimately let us down. Because other things always leave us wanting more. We can always eat more and finer food, make more money, achieve more, find a more attractive person, gain more power, more pleasure — with the tempting things of this world, we never have enough, yet fulfillment seems to be right around the corner, one step away, one more hoop to jump through, one more compromise to make. Because the devil says we aren't good enough without more.

He's got a point, though. We are flawed, limited, sinful. And the devil always wants to keep us distracted, divided, divorced from God. Because in God, our broken, limited selves are good enough, for the pure, unvarnished reason that God is good enough. Despite our flaws, God loves us, satisfies us, embraces us, and makes us whole. Just as God showed Israel the way through the wilderness, Jesus shows us the way through the temptations of the spiritual wilderness of this life.

Stay faithful to God, and everything will be all right in the end. Even when we face trials, our relationship with God will keep things in perspective, keep us from giving in to fear or despair, and keep us in the loving community of the Church. Keep your relationship with God your first priority, and you will quite naturally put the other things of this world into their correct, healthy, sustainable places in an orderly, satisfying life. Rather than eternally scrambling for "more" and lamenting your incompleteness, you'll

rejoice in God's complete love and grace, and you'll be ready to help other people through trials of their own.

\*<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/03/will-this-be-on-test.html>