

WGUMC March 5, 2017 "Stages of Faith: Magical Thinking"  
Matthew 4:1-11

[This is the first in a series of sermons engaging with the work of James Fowler, a United Methodist pastor Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University. He also was the Director of the Center for Research on Faith and Moral Development and the Center for Ethics at Emory. In 1984, he wrote *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. In this first sermon, I am focusing on the first stage of faith that Fowler calls "Intuitive-Projective" Faith for children from 2 to 6 or 7 years old.]

The Gospel reading on the first Sunday in Lent is always the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, so I've preached on this story many times. My usual take on the text is that this experience was wilderness training for the Son of God. You could call it Upward Bound or Messiah Boot Camp. After training with the devil, Jesus would have no problem with the scribes and Pharisees. And if he could stand up to Satan, he could certainly stand up to the Romans.

So Jesus goes into the wilderness, and after fasting for forty days and forty nights, he's famished. It is no surprise that the devil first tempts him with food. Does this remind you of

another story in the Bible? What about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? In a sense, this story is a retelling of that one. Whereas the old Adam gave into the serpent and ate the fruit, this new Adam resists the temptation to eat. This is one way to understand the story, as part of a larger story about how Jesus came to do what Adam could not: obey God and live a life without sin.

We pay attention to Jesus in this story because we want to identify with the new Adam, and not the old one. We want to align ourselves with the hero of the story because we seldom get to play that role. But today, I'm going to have us pay closer attention to the devil, because I think we might find we have something in common with him.

Let's take a look. You may have heard the story about the devil being an angel who rebelled against God and fell from heaven. There are allusions to the story in the Gospel of Luke [10:18], perhaps in Isaiah [14:12], but the story itself isn't in

the Bible. You find it in 2 Enoch, a book that didn't even make it into the Apocrypha. [2 Enoch 29:4] But the origins of the story go back farther than that. Parallels are found in Canaanite and Babylonian mythology.

Like any good myth, the story of the fall of the devil is both false and true. By that I mean that while the story is not factual in the sense of being historical, it nevertheless holds truth for us. Hear me out.

The devil was thrown out of heaven and he fell out of the presence of God. So it occurred to me that perhaps what he is doing in the wilderness with Jesus is desperately trying to claw his way back to God. In that case, he comes to test Jesus because he wants to know if Jesus is the way to God. If he is, then the devil will try to use Jesus to get back to God. That would explain why he keeps saying, "If you are the Son of God...."

Right there, I see a similarity to our situation. The story of the fall of the devil sounds like the story of the "fall" of Adam and Eve (and, by extension, the rest of us). The Garden of Eden is also a myth but it tells us this truth: that just like the devil, we shut ourselves out of the presence of God. And the rest of the Bible is essentially the story of how we, too, have been trying to get back.

That longing for the presence of God is hardwired into us. You can see it in the interaction between newborns and their parents. Babies don't know much, but they are very aware of the presence and absence of their parents. After all, good parents provide everything the baby needs. If they're hungry, parents feed them. If they're wet, they change them. If they're frightened, here comes a parent to comfort them.

For infants and for small children, the parents in their lives are like God in their lives: all powerful, or seemingly so. And you

could describe our early life as a story of the presence and absence of that power.

Since we first experience power in the form of our parents, it's natural for us to think of God in the same way. The devil also thinks of God in terms of power. If the devil wants to get back to God it's because the devil wants power.

And in that sense, I think there is a bit of the devil in all of us. We all want God's power, or at least we want to tell God how to use it. We are always asking God to intervene on our behalf: manage that problem, mend that relationship, cure that illness, and kill that enemy!

Children will ask the same kinds of things of their parents. But parents aren't God and often feel powerless to change the situation. Luckily, children have a secret power: the power of their imaginations. At this stage of life—between the ages of 2 and 6 or 7—the lines between fantasy and reality are pretty blurry, and kids will use their imagination to try to control

events that are out of their control. This is called "magical thinking." It's a great coping mechanism.

For instance, if they are hungry enough, they might fantasize about having a power that can turn stones into bread. If they are feeling neglected enough, they might imagine themselves doing something spectacularly dangerous like jumping off a building just to get their parents' attention. If they are being abused or bullied enough, they might dream about being the ruler of all the kingdoms of the world. When the devil tries to engage Jesus in this kind of thinking, it is sinister. But for a child, this is perfectly normal and healthy.

At this developmental stage, children are narcissistic. They think that they are the center of the universe, but that means that when something happens, they often assume that they somehow caused it to happen.

You might hear a child say: "If I hadn't made mommy so mad, she and daddy wouldn't have gotten a divorce." "If I had

remembered to walk the dog, he wouldn't have gotten out of the backyard and run over by a car." Of course, they project that same kind of thinking onto their understanding of God. If I pray, God will make the sun shine on my birthday. If I'm good, God will make Grandpa's cancer go away.

We smile and sometimes wince at the imaginations of children, and we are glad that we gave up on that kind of magical thinking long ago. But did we? Aren't there times when we play these kinds of imaginary games with God? Aren't there times when we fall back on a magical understanding of God's power? And then when we don't get what we want, we have a crisis of faith. We might think that God doesn't love us or that God isn't really God after all. The problem with magical thinking is that the magic doesn't work very well for grownups. There is no great and powerful Oz behind that curtain, and there never was.

The devil in our story is an extreme example of magical thinking. He is the ultimate narcissist. In talking to Jesus, he sounds like a child who never grew up, who thinks the world exists only for him, revolves around him. He thinks that if he can get the Son of God to do tricks for him, it will prove that he has godlike powers and maybe that will make him feel better about being shut out of the presence of God.

There is in all of us a child who never grew up, a child who is still trying to compensate for feeling shut out of the presence of God. We, too, want God's power, but many of us don't yet understand how it works. And we are tempted to believe what the devil believes: that God's power is something we can possess and manipulate and use to dominate.

What we need to know is that God doesn't hold onto power. In Christ, God gives it away. So, despite what the devil may want us to think, God's power isn't going to get us a kingdom, but it will take us to a cross. Whenever you see a



cross, think of it as a symbol of our power-sharing God: a God who hungers and thirsts, gets tired and frustrated, betrayed and humiliated, a God who suffers and dies, all to share the power of his life with us, for no other reason than he loves us. This is the gospel. It isn't magical, but it is powerful.