

Temptation in the Wilderness

Before we talk about our passage for today, I want to just talk a little bit about Epiphany in general. The word comes from two roots – phan, or the verb phanero. It means to make visible. As a noun we could say revelation, or manifestation. Epi is upon. So Epiphany literally means to make visible upon.

Epiphany is also used as a word that means an aha moment...a moment when we realized something we hadn't before...a realization that makes us say, aha, this changes everything.

The traditional Epiphany texts are designed to tell the aha moment of God's appearance on earth. It's a story of Magi from foreign countries knowing who Jesus was before many of the Jews did.

It's a story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan – when God declares this is my beloved son.

Matthew's gospel shares, really with all of scripture, that revelation of who God is. And who God most clearly is to us is who we see in Jesus.

But something else is revealed in the gospels...and that's the kingdom of God. As we worked our way through John last year, I realized that it's mostly Jesus himself I fall in love with in John's gospel.

In the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, I fall in love with Jesus' image of the kingdom of God. Or as Matthew calls it, the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Jesus in Matthew is a little harder to love. His vision of God's reign will humble all of us. But it will also stir our imagination as we think, wow! What it would be like if we Christians actually embodied Jesus' vision.

Matthew's primary goal is to bring his readers and hearers to believe that Jesus is the long promised one. He's the one anointed and sent by God to rule over heaven and earth.

Of all the gospel authors, Matthew uses the most Old Testament references to make his case. He uses Old Testament references to support the contention that Jesus is where history has been headed all along.

Before we dive into the temptations Jesus faced, there's one story we need to briefly talk about. Last Sunday we read about the Magi traveling to find Jesus. We heard about how Herod's scholars helped the Magi figure out where they should look. And then Herod told the Magi to come back and tell him where to find the boy so he could go pay him honor.

But the Magi were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, so they found another way home.

Knowing he'd been tricked, Herod issued an order for all the baby boys two years old and younger in Bethlehem to be killed.

Joseph, Jesus' father, was also warned. He took the child and his mother and fled to Egypt. The other baby boys in Bethlehem weren't so lucky. It was a horrific scene of death. That's what you get when the Herods of the world are in charge. |

The temptations reveal first of all that a ruler like Herod is not what Jesus is. Jesus is not the kind of ruler who will seize power at any cost.

Let's look at Satan here. The temptations Satan puts before Jesus force Jesus to make a choice. That choice is not just the three things Satan offers. It's a choice for Jesus to answer the question, who really rules over heaven and earth?

Satan is in fact making a case for his own reign. If he can convince Jesus that he is better off backing Satan, then he wins. But the kind of rule Satan would usher in is the kind of rule you get with the Herods of the world. It's the kind of rule that grasps after power, no matter who gets hurt in the process.

Make no mistake, Herod still exists. He may have different names and different ethnicities. But Herod – and his ruler, the Satan – have yet to be completely defeated.

Herod exists wherever ruling power oppresses people and deprives people of living the life God desires for them. Herod exists wherever people and creation are abused and exploited for the sake of power and wealth for a few.

This scene is more than just Jesus being put to the test. This scene is a glimpse into the cosmic battle of God's will for creation and the forces of death.

Is Satan telling the truth here? Does he have the authority to give Jesus these things? Turns out Satan is lying. Spoiler alert here, but at the very end of Matthew, Jesus says all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Satan never had the authority to offer these things.

But how many rulers and powers still believe Satan? Do we believe Satan has that authority? Who do we really believe is in charge?

If we believe Satan has the power he says he does to rule the world, then we will go one of two ways. Either we'll completely despair and give up all hope. Or we will choose to follow Satan. Either way, the world of Herod is what we get. A world of death and destruction.

Jesus has a particular metaphor he uses for the sort of world we get with Herod and with Satan. He calls it Gehenna. Gehenna is an actual place. It was the smoldering garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. It was basically a gigantic, eternal, smoldering compost pile.

That's what gets translated as hell in the gospels. In Matthew's gospel, it's the place of outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It's the place where humans have chosen the world of Herod and Satan. I don't really believe hell is some other real place. It's what the world we live in now looks like when we choose Herod and the Satan.

In the temptations, Jesus shows us a different kind of ruler from the Herods of the world. From here, Jesus will begin to lay out what kind of realm he will rule. He announces the kingdom of heaven...what the other gospel writers call the kingdom of God.

And then he lays out what that realm will look like. The reign of God will be experienced in Jesus' teaching and healing. The Good news is that God is in charge now and it will be a different world from the world of Herod.

But the Herods of the world are persistent. This cosmic clash will culminate with Jesus on a cross...an apparent victory for Herod after all. But we know it doesn't end there.

So, we look back through resurrection eyes. We see that Jesus not only won the battle here in the wilderness. On the cross, he won it for the whole cosmos.

Matthew's work is to bring us to believe that Jesus is the one anointed and sent by God to rule over heaven and earth. He leads us to trust that in the cross, Satan is ultimately defeated, even as we continue to fight against the influence of Satan. And then Matthew invites us to live as if we really do believe that Jesus is in charge.