

"You Can't Make Me" by Rev. Dr. Peter Thompson

Matthew 4:1-11

The temptation Jesus faces in the wilderness comes after fasting 40 days and 40 nights, a specification that would resonate with Matthew's predominately Jewish Christian community. Whether we reference Noah, Moses, Elijah, or Jonah, the number 40 is rooted in Israel's struggle to practice faithfulness in the wilderness, day and night. Now, Jesus has endured 40 days and nights of fasting and solitude in the wilderness and arrives at a critical junction where his loyalty to God the Father is tested through his confrontation with the "tester", who is also called the "devil." Important for us to note is the word "devil" is a verbal noun meaning "to throw over or across." In a broader sense, the word means "one who attacks, misleads, deceives, diverts, discredits, or slanders." All throughout Matthew, the devil seeks to mislead Jesus about the meaning of sonship and the purposes of God. Admit it or not, the devil is real, and the power of the devil is real.

Anytime this passage in Matthew comes up I think of *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*, which has been considered an allegory by some. It is not a perfect match, but I can see the temptation to do so. Johnny can be viewed as Jesus and the battle of the fiddles viewed as Jesus' journey to the cross. The banter between the devil and Johnny can be that of the mockers and betrayers and haters. In Jesus' journey to the cross, the devil surely believed victory was won. However, as we know, in those three days following his death, Jesus was able to play a different, more elevated, and all-powerful tune, defeating death and making way for the gift of eternal life.

*The devil went down to Georgia, he was lookin' for a soul to steal
He was in a bind 'cause he was way behind... And he was willin' to make a deal.
When he came across this young man sawin' on a fiddle and playin' it hot,
The devil jumped up on a hickory stump... And said, "boy, let me tell you what."
"I guess you didn't know it but I'm a fiddle player too
And if you'd care to take a dare, I'll make a bet with you.
Now you play a pretty good fiddle, boy... But give the devil his due
I'll bet a fiddle of gold against your soul... 'Cause I think I'm better than you."*

*The boy said, "my name's Johnny and it might be a sin... But I'll take your bet, you're gonna regret
'Cause I'm the best there's ever been."
Johnny, rosin up your bow and play your fiddle hard
'Cause Hell's broke loose in Georgia, and the devil deals the cards.
If you win, you get this shiny fiddle made of gold... But if you lose, the devil gets your soul.*

*The devil opened up his case and he said, "I'll start this show"
Fire flew from his fingertips as he rosined up his bow... And he pulled the bow across the strings
And it made a evil hiss... Then a band of demons joined in... ..*

*When the devil finished, Johnny said, "well, you're pretty good, ol' son
But sit down in that chair right there... And let me show you how it's done."
"Fire on the Mountain" run boys, run... The devil's in the House of the Rising Sun... ..*

*The devil bowed his head because he knew that he'd been beat
And he laid that golden fiddle on the ground at Johnny's feet
Johnny said, "Devil, just come on back if you ever wanna try again
I done told you once you..., I'm the best that's ever been."*

I know the wilderness in which Jesus spent his 40 days and 40 nights was not Georgia but temptation from the devil has the power to transcend time and space. Just like the devil tempts Jesus, the devil arrives to tempt Johnny as well. But... the good news for us is that in both narratives, Jesus' and Johnny's, the devil doesn't win. I will say this though. The way Jesus went about defeating the devil's temptation and the way Johnny went about it were quite different. Let's look at the difference by looking deeper into each encounter.

When the devil approached Jesus the first time in the wilderness, the devil tempted Jesus with food because Jesus had been without it. The devil starts somewhat simple and small, attempting to mislead Jesus into using his power for himself rather than trusting the Father to satisfy his need. If Jesus would take the bait on the food, the devil wouldn't be out anything and Jesus would have given up everything for a temporary fix. What does Jesus use against the devil's offering of food? Jesus says, "You can't make me," because "One does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus' strength and nourishment came from the spirit and truth of God's good news and power. The point: No matter how hungry or delicious the food would have been, Jesus will not misuse his power for personal material gain.

When the devil attacked Jesus the second time in the wilderness, the devil raises the bar and invites Jesus to make himself secure from injury or even death. Boldly enough, the devil even uses the Word of God to lure Jesus in. Could Jesus have called on God? Could he have jumped off and God swooped in? I don't know. What we do know is that is not what happened. Jesus looked at the devil again and said, "You can't make me" because I know God has said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." The devil was misquoting and misinterpreting scripture out of context, for scripture does not endorse testing God's protective grace for the sake of self-assurance. The point: Jesus will not misuse his power to make himself safe and secure. And once again, the Devil was defeated.

When the devil wined and dined and gave Jesus the mountain top experience the third time in the wilderness, the devil pushed the limits again to something Jesus desired more than anything, a kingdom of believers and people who followed him. The offer from the devil appears to be the world as we know it and all its inhabitants. It was like the devil was saying, I will leave humanity alone if you but give me your soul Jesus. Isn't that what you want? Isn't that what God wants? The devil was attempting to seduce Jesus with full, non-compete,

dominion and prestige. The devil's power was real and the test against Jesus and the world was deceptively tempting. However, Jesus said once again, "You can't make me," because I know God's commandment, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." The point: Jesus will not misuse his power to amass clout and esteem.

The "devil's" power is real, but it is limited. Like Jesus, we, as believers, can trust in God's Word and saving power to fight alongside us. Like Jesus, we can stand on the promises of God in faith and trust. Like Jesus then, the devil will leave and be replaced by angels from God.

Central to each of the challenges that Jesus faces is a single question: "To what extent will he trust God to be God and so be himself?" Jesus proves to be up for the test.

Despite the devil's temptation, Jesus remains maddeningly himself. "Perhaps it would be more accurate to say he remains steadfastly God's." (Patrick J. Willson, FOTW, 49)

What about us? How do we respond in the face of the devil's temptations and quest to steal our souls? Here is where I think we can glean from Johnny and his one on one with the devil. I think it sheds a little light on how we, as human beings, tend to deal with the devil's temptations. It is in this that the allegory begins to break down.

The devil approached Johnny with a dare. Rather than turning the other cheek, he even acknowledges it might be a sin to do what he was about to do, Johnny bowed his chest and went to war with the devil. Johnny took the challenge and bet on himself to win. Rather than respond with "You can't make me," because "I don't have anything I need to prove to you. I am already enough in God's eyes.", Johnny said, "I will take your bet and prove to you that I am better." Johnny put his soul on the line. And for what? Temporary pride?

Yes, Jesus took on the devil, but not by himself. Everything Jesus did he did with God's grace, wisdom, and power backing him and guiding him. No more than Jesus, can we, you and I, in our humanity, be able to fight off the powers and temptations of the devil on our own. The devil knows our weaknesses and works tirelessly to break us down and get us to give in. Why? Because the devil wants our souls. The devil wants our allegiance.

We tend to hear a dare and think we must do it. Our boys have gotten into the game truth or dare lately and one of the rules is that if you choose to dare you must do whatever the dare is. I am warning you, don't play the game with Noah. Why? He doesn't bargain fairly. (*Hahahahahaha*)

To borrow the title of Alec Benjamin's song, the "Devil Doesn't Bargain" fairly or at all. (*And just to be clear, I am not in any way trying to compare Noah with the devil.*) What I am saying is that we must separate any game philosophy from real life temptation. Johnny's approach to walking a tight rope with the devil is not the response we are called to embody.

Jesus' entire purpose of life is a gift to us to show us how to live and how to act and what to say and who to follow. In the wilderness, Jesus shows us the right tools of faith, hope, trust, fear and respect for God, and the Word (promises) of God, and is an example for how to stand up against the devil and say, "You can't make me."