

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*February 26, 2023*

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## Fully Human

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I am very excited about the Lenten devotional we're encouraging the community to use this year entitled "This is my Body." Each devotion explores a different aspect of Jesus' humanity. He was fully human after all, which means he experienced things like puberty and stress; he likely took naps and got crabby on occasion. The stories the devotional uses are wide-ranging, but they didn't include our reading for today, though I think they could have!

When you think about it, facing temptation is yet one more aspect of being human. Finding ourselves being tested with regards to our values and ideals is absolutely a part of the human experience. And those tests can be particularly difficult when they utilize or involve other common human realities.

Basic biology makes it clear that humans need to eat. That need may not be quite so urgent as our need for water, or as fundamental as our need for air, but it is a deep need for all of humanity. And being hungry certainly affects just about all other aspects of our selves! This is so common a trope that we have Snickers® advertisements that contain the tagline, "You're not you when you're hungry."

The devil tests Jesus on a very human level; on the level of biology! Jesus has fasted for forty days and is famished. How easy it would have been to turn, just a few mind you, stones into loaves of bread! But Jesus doesn't. Is this to illustrate that Jesus is somehow better than the average human at fighting temptation? Perhaps. But I think there's even more going on here.

Don't get me wrong, fighting temptation is an important discipline for us to try to develop. Our society would quickly crumble if everyone went around giving into their deepest desires and impulses all the time. But I think Jesus is doing more than just resisting the devils temptations in this wilderness scene. I'm

more and more convinced that on top of resisting temptation, this temptation narrative is also about Jesus' identifying with humanity in a whole and complete way.

Jesus doesn't just choose not to exercise his power to overcome his hunger out of obedience to God. I have come to believe that he makes this choice also because no other human on earth would have been able to turn stone to bread to satisfy his hunger. And Jesus chooses, again and again and again, to identify completely with humanity.

The same argument can be made for the other two temptations as well. Jesus chooses not to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple not just because he knows not to "put the Lord your God to the test,"<sup>1</sup> though that is certainly reason enough on its own. But I think he does it also because no other human would expect angels to catch them. The implied security from harm in that quote from Psalm 91 that the devil uses is not something humans have.

And it's such an enticing temptation too! In the end it's about safety and security. Every human on this planet wants to feel safe and secure. And we can feel the need to test that safety, to be sure of it. The temptation goes, if I'm beloved by God (which we all are) then God must keep me safe...let me just test that quick. We want to turn our belovedness into a shield. But the promise of the cross is that we are beloved even when we're not safe, and God joins us even in our vulnerability.

And to what other being on the planet would the devil offer "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor"<sup>2</sup> just for worshipping him? It's certainly an exceedingly tempting offer, isn't it? And one I'm pretty sure I would fail to resist. The chance to order the world in the way I want? Yes, please! The world would be a much better place if I were in charge...I love to think to myself. And of course, that's nonsense. I am a broken human being, and that brokenness would manifest itself pretty quickly were I in charge.

Yet Jesus could have remade the world! As a matter of fact Jesus is in the business of doing exactly that! But the witness of Scripture is that Jesus remakes the world by example and most often through his disciples, through those walking his Way. And that Way involves giving up power, not hoarding

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 4:7b (NRSVUE)

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 4:8b

it. That Way involves standing in solidarity with the oppressed, not perpetuating cycles of violence.

Jesus could have misused his power at any time during these temptations. But he doesn't. In part, I'm sure, out of the faithful obedience to God the Father that is such a part of his nature. But also out of his identifying with humanity in such a complete way. Not only does he provide us with an example to reach towards (though we'll never be as good at resisting temptation as Christ); but he also shows us what it can mean to be fully human.

The use of divine power is a particularly interesting subject in scripture. But so is its non-use. Jesus frequently uses his divine power to bring about healing and reconciliation; in general, he uses it to serve peoples' needs and restore them to wholeness. He does not use it to serve his own needs; nor does he use it to manipulate others (e.g. sure I'll heal you, if you just do this for me).

How much easier would Christ's life and ministry have been if he used his power in that way. But of course, any community built on that sort of foundation cannot be free or authentic. It cannot be the sort of human community we were created to live.

Thankfully, Jesus just doesn't use his power that way. Jesus doesn't take the easy way, rather he takes the difficult way...the limited way...the human way. He seems to understand that in order to change humanity he must first show his own, full, humanity. He faces temptations and responds to them with the exact same tools we have access to as well: faith and a deep understanding of his own humanness. This doesn't mean we'll overcome temptation all the time ourselves, but it does teach us that it is possible!

The Way of the Cross also teaches us that when we do fail, God's mercy overcomes the consequences of our failures. Jesus provides us with an example of what it can look like to be fully human. Will we live up to that example? Most of the time, probably not! But we're still called to try! We're still called to righteous living...living as we were created to live...as full human beings in the midst beloved community.

Jesus, fully human, faces very human temptations. But being Jesus he has a choice we don't have...he didn't have to face these tests in the same way we

do. But that's exactly the choice he makes. He chooses to be human... hungry, vulnerable, and powerless in the face of mighty nations and armies.

We face our own choices too, don't we? To misuse our power and influence. To exert control over others. To shield ourselves from vulnerability and the brokenness all around us. To participate in unjust and broken systems without trying to reform them. What would it mean for us, in the face of these choices, to seek the most human response...the fullest human response? Maybe if that was what we sought, our responses to those temptations would be more human...more humane.

To walk the Way of Christ is to follow his example as best we can. And perhaps surprisingly, that seems to be less about being special or set apart and more about being fully human, as we were created to be. This means going deeper into who we are in order to understand ourselves better. Delving down inside ourselves to find that divine spark that we carry...that each of us carries. That imprint of God's image on our very selves. That common element which we all bear that links us all...that element which forms the basis of love and compassion, empathy and care. That spark which Christ shows us is a part of being fully human. Amen.