### “Worship the Lord” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Feb. 26, 2023

**Deuteronomy 6:13–14**

13The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. 14Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you.

**Matthew 4:1–11**

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” 4But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” 7Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” 11Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Greetings to all the warm-hearted people here on this wintry morning. We can all be grateful for warm houses and comforts on these cold days. And we can go on at length about our many blessings of family, friends, and modern conveniences. But we also can say that we have our share of burdens even in the midst of plenty. Some of us face physical discomfort or shortages, and at times there are family or workplace concerns that we all wish could be solved. We can trust that God knows our every worry, and when we ask for help to know God’s guidance, that help will come. But we shouldn’t expect an easy solution. (How often do we see that quick fixes do not provide lasting solutions, anyway?)

Today’s passage shows that even Jesus experienced these moments of trouble and temptation. There are many interesting features to the temptation story which have been dug into by preachers, philosophers, and novelists over the ages. The Russian writer Dostoyevsky is drawing upon this Bible passage in his scene in *The Brothers Karamazov* where the evil cardinal, the Grand Inquisitor, says “There are three forces . . . that can overcome and capture once and for all the conscience of these feeble, undisciplined creatures, so as to give them happiness. These forces are miracle, mystery, and authority” (Dell edition, p. 307). The Grand Inquisitor claims that church authorities can rule the population with these powers, and that they don’t need or want any interference from the Son of God, who has returned to earth in this story and whom the Inquisitor holds as a prisoner. In Dostoyevsky’s mind, the evil priest is a Catholic, although he doesn’t say that directly, but he implies it is the Catholic Church that seeks to rule through miracle, mystery, and authority. However, we could apply it just as well to Orthodox Churches or even to Protestant Churches where the minister exercises unjust power over credulous believers. I think of the Branch Davidians, with their leader David Koresh, who slept with all the women in his community, and who burned the whole compound down rather than surrender to authorities.

Dostoyevsky’s story is a fascinating interpretation on its own merits, whether or not it’s an accurate reading of the three temptations. Let’s look at the three. The first one is an offer of a miraculous production of food for the Son of Man, who is hungry at that time. One could say that it is the power of miracle, but it is also the temptation of using miracle for one’s own benefit. None of Jesus’ miracles were ever for his own benefit. I think that’s the real temptation, and one to which Jesus never bowed, never using his powers for his own comfort or position.

The second one was also miracle related: the suggestion that he should throw himself off the temple pinnacle, since God’s angels would miraculously intervene and protect him. It really is similar to the first, I think, except that it has to do with divine protection rather than with food.

Where it really differs is that it would be a public action. If Jesus threw himself off the temple, there would be witnesses, and if he was buoyed up and placed safely on the ground by invisible forces, that would be witnessed, too. So it would be a dramatic public gesture of miraculous power, but also of *mysterious* power, with invisible angels acting. So it might be that Dostoyevsky is accurate in listing the first two temptations as miracle and mystery.

The third temptation is a blatant offer of political power over the kingdoms of the world. The devil seems to have the ability to hand this power over to Jesus. Jesus gives all power to God, speaking of worshipping God alone, and we heard the Deuteronomy passage that he is quoting there. It seems to do with authority, so Dostoyevsky *has* given us an accurate summary of the nature of the temptations to miracle, mystery, and authority.

What is interesting is this Russian author sees this as the devilish power of an evil church. Churches can indeed exercise a terrible control over believers. Monks and priests were among those who pushed Europeans into entering the military misadventures we call the Crusades, which, among other things, led to attacks on Jewish neighborhoods in Europe. I think it was a brilliant insight by the novelist to picture a church that wholly gives in to the devil’s temptations.

Matthew does not bring the church into it, but describes the devil’s attempt to get Jesus to compromise his principles, to use his miracles for self-gain, for public show, or to worship power for its own sake. Many humans have succumbed to such temptations, but Jesus never did.

We face similar temptations: not miracles, but indeed the temptation to act for selfish gain, for public show, or for power-grasping. Actually, these are all temptations to worldly power. Now, we all need some *normal* power, the power to be free, to spend time where we want to, and so on. We probably want to get promoted in our chosen professions. This is not what I’m talking about, as long as one is not unethically grabbing power or lying and cheating to get it.

Jesus never grasped power for himself. In fact, we can see his time alone in a deserted location may have been a time of deep reflection for him. For we see, after this time of testing, that Jesus gathers twelve disciples and begins preaching God’s message.

In our own lives, we know that temptations will arise and we, like Jesus, can reflect and plan: How will we act? Will we use unethical shortcuts to persuade or manipulate others? Will we take credit for other people’s work? In the long run, when we give in to temptation, there is not only the immediate remorse but also consequences. We learn that it is easier to tell the truth than to have to remember a lie. As always, we must let Jesus be our guide. Let us strive to bring the divine into our human lives. Let us bring the Spirit into matter, for when God and people are united, anything is possible.