

# The Devious Chess Master

---

## Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying 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.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

**T**hat devil is a crafty fellow. Today's Gospel reading tells us that after Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, the Spirit led him into the wilderness for an encounter with Satan. Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights and, as Matthew writes, "he was famished."

No surprise there. Any of us would feel a bit peckish after forty days and forty nights without eating. Most of us find it difficult to get from breakfast to lunch without a snack along the way. So the devil pounces on Jesus'

hunger. If you're as great as everybody says you are, he says, if you're the Son of God, turn those stones over there into bread. You're due for a snack.

Jesus parries the temptation, of course: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

But Satan isn't finished. Let's visit the top of the temple and see what you're made of. Or maybe you're afraid of heights, Satan says devilishly. And then he pulls out all the stops and quotes scripture: "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.'"

I confess that I'm always a tad uneasy whenever the devil is represented as a person. St. Augustine, seeking to defuse Manichaeism, which posited that the spiritual realm was good and the material world was evil, weighed in on the issue. He rejected the notion of Satan as the embodiment of evil, because that would make God, the creator of all things, the author of evil. To maneuver around this quandary, Augustine argued that evil should be understood simply the absence of good.

Still, I recognize the value of seeing Satan as the personification of evil. It allows us to visualize our adversary, the better to chart his moves. Think of Satan as a devious chess master or as a skilled poker player always reading and sizing up his adversary, knowing what buttons to push and when to strike for maximum advantage.

It's no accident, then, that Satan seeks first to assuage Jesus' hunger; Jesus was famished, after all, from a forty-day fast. When that fails, Satan counters with the prospect of a spectacular stunt, a Houdini-like moment that will leave the crowds gasping. Cast yourself down from the temple, Satan says, and demonstrate to all the world your connections with the man upstairs. And then devil quotes scripture to drive home his point.

But Jesus parries Satan's challenges with his own quotations from scripture.

**T**he account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness illustrates for us the deviousness of our adversary. He strikes at our vulnerabilities and in our moments of weakness. In these forty days of Lent, when some of us have vowed some form of self-denial as a spiritual discipline, the temptation will be to renege on that vow. It may be food – or chocolate – or some other form of sustenance or comfort. Satan strikes at the obvious vulnerability.

That in itself may not be so consequential. We are, all of us, weak and fallen beings, and our eternal destiny does not, I believe, hang on a truffle or a peanut M & M. But the chess master is always plotting his moves. It may be the larger temptations of sexual infidelity or ethical laxity in business dealings. No one will know. It's harmless, really. Just this once, and I'll never do it again.

The wily devil has an abundance of weapons at his disposal. Money and fame and self-aggrandizement. Food and the internet and raunchy programs on cable television. Professional jealousy and malicious gossip. The American weakness for excess and gluttony, from food to fossil fuels. The devil deals his cards. The chess master knows when to strike, rook to knight-five. Check. You look across the chess board and into the eyes of evil.

That's how Jesus must have felt as Satan led him up the mountain for one final temptation. Both of them were winded from the ascent. At the summit, with its breathtaking views all around, kingdoms everywhere, Satan turned and said, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." The chess master made his final move. Check.

Check, but not checkmate. Jesus resisted temptation there in the wilderness, just as he calls us to do. And he did so not relying on his own powers but by appealing to a power even higher than himself. And so too must we.

**I** suspect that when Jesus encountered Satan there in the Judean wilderness he knew that he would be tangling with a formidable adversary, a skilled and devious chess master who knew precisely when to strike. The devil knows our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and we must be prepared to resist his onslaughts.

“Put on the full armor of God,” St. Paul admonishes, “so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.”<sup>1</sup>

That devil, after all, is a crafty fellow.

First Sunday in Lent  
February 10, 2008  
St. Paul’s Episcopal Church  
Woodbury, Connecticut

First Sunday in Lent  
March 13, 2011  
Christ Church  
Middle Haddam, Connecticut

---

<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 6:1 (TNIV).