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Matthew 4:1-11

## MIRROR IMAGES

It's been my experience that not all mirrors are created equal. Maybe you have noticed this as well when looking in mirrors in all the many bathrooms you have entered. There are "good mirrors" and there are "bad mirrors." "Good mirrors" offer back a flattering image of yourself. And you walk away feeling pretty good about how you look. "Bad mirrors," however, are a blow to your ego. Your color looks bad. Your skin looks bad. Your hair looks bad. Bad mirrors make you look old, fat, and frumpy. Surely I'm not the only one who has noticed how two separate mirrors can reflect back very different images of oneself.

The Bible tells us that we are created "in the image of God." The way I understand this is that we are created with God's holy imprint upon us and that we then are made to be walking, breathing, living mirrors of God's image. Our job in life is to reflect God to the people and circumstances around us. When people look at us, they should see the image of God's love, compassion, justice, mercy. As people of faith, we strive to be those "good mirrors"--people who reflect God's goodness, rather than living as "bad mirrors"--as people who distort the image of God into something it is not.

Behind the temptation story lies the issue of what image Jesus will reflect. Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan River. During his baptism God's Spirit descends upon him and God's voice declares, "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In this moment Jesus' identity is proclaimed: he is God's beloved son.

And then immediately after this baptismal experience, Jesus is led into the wilderness where this identity is tested. Whose image will he reflect? The tempter shows Jesus all the

many ways Jesus could use his power and exercise his free will. He is tempted to turn stones to bread, to satisfy himself. He is tempted to throw himself off the top of the temple, to demonstrate his close association with the powerful--he's so tight with God that God's very angels will keep him from injury. He is tempted to secure the glory of political leadership, to rule the kingdoms of the world. The tempter invites Jesus to gaze upon all these possibilities for himself, of what he can do for himself, of who he can be, of what he can obtain. The tempter holds up a mirror to Jesus and invites him to look. Look, the tempter says. Look at who you can be.

But Jesus has already gazed upon his reflection in a very different mirror. Jesus has looked into the waters of baptism and in those waters Jesus has seen his God-given reflection. He is God's beloved. And so Jesus knows his true identity. He knows what he looks like. He knows who he is.

Jesus' temptation is *our* temptation as well. We are people made in the image of God. We too have received *our* identities in the waters of baptism. We are God's beloved. We are disciples of Christ. But the temptations around us beckon us to gaze into other mirrors that distort our identity. And these mirrors we gaze upon can shape our lives, ourselves, our behaviors, our values.

What mirrors might those be? Well, some of them look like this: these black mirrors we carry around in our pockets. Our cell phones, our computer screens, our TVs are the modern day mirrors into which we gaze. What we see in these mirrors has the power to shape our identities, to inform our attitudes and opinions, and to influence our behaviors--in ways that can be good, but also in a whole lot of ways that distort God's image. In these little black mirrors, we are drawn into a consuming culture, where an endless supply of material goods are put on display for

us to gaze upon and to want and to acquire. In these mirrors, people themselves are commodified through the explosion of digital pornographic content. In these mirrors we witness the distortion of truth and the promotion of hatred and intolerance. These little black mirrors draw us into a world of self-promotion and especially into a world of self-absorption. I am reminded of the Greek myth of Narcissus. According to the legend, Narcissus was a hunter of great physical beauty. One day while hunting he came upon a very calm lake where he happened to catch his own reflection in the still waters. He became so entranced with his own image that he could not tear himself away from this mirror and died sitting there gazing at his own reflection. It is from this story we have the word "narcissist" meaning a person who is excessively self-absorbed. As we observe the intense ways we are drawn to our cell phones morning, noon, and night, we do have to consider how we may have fallen into Narcissus' same trap.

To be clear, the technological devices that have become a part of our daily lives are not inherently bad. But we do need to consider how easily they can shape our sense of self, our priorities, and our behaviors in ways that are not healthy or faithful. In a similar way, there was nothing inherently wrong with the temptations put before Jesus: to have bread, to exercise power, to seek leadership. There is nothing necessarily wrong or bad about these things. In fact, it is noteworthy that all three of these "temptations" will surface again for Jesus but with a radically different outcome. In the wilderness, Jesus refuses to turn the stones to bread for himself, but later in the gospel, he will feed thousands of hungry people with just five loaves and two fish, and he will teach his disciples to pray to God for their "daily bread."

In the wilderness, Jesus refuses to test God's power by throwing himself down from the top of the temple. But at the end of his life, Jesus demonstrates his trust in God's power when he is lifted up high on a Roman cross.

Jesus refuses the tempter's offer of the political kingdoms of the world, but instead he offers the kingdom of heaven to all who follow him in the way of love and justice.

The difference between the bread, power, and leadership offered to Jesus in his wilderness encounter with the tempter and how Jesus embraces these concepts later in his ministry has everything to do with the mirror through which Jesus looks upon the world. Jesus resists the temptation to become a reflection of this world and its use of power and its self-serving goals. And instead, Jesus reflects his identity as God's beloved: one who loves, shows mercy, stands for justice, acts with compassion, trusts in God, and offers his life in service to others.

The temptation we face in our lives is allowing ourselves to be shaped by the world instead of by God. And it is hard to resist this temptation because what we gaze upon has the power to shape us and form us and fashion our identities. Whether the ads we see on TV, or the toxic hatred, division, and cruelty we witness on the nightly news, or the pull of the little black mirrors we carry around with us, our identities can be altered bit by bit in ways that blur the image of God. But that is why we come here, to gather together, where we can gaze upon the love of God and the image of God. Here, right where we can't miss it, is the Table. And we are invited to feast our eyes upon this. We gaze at the Table and we are reminded that God loves us and everyone unconditionally. We look at the Table and we recall God's sacrificial love on our behalf, even when we are most unlovable. The Table reflects to us inclusion of all people no matter their circumstances. And the Table shows us a God of mercy and forgiveness. The Table

teaches us that God nourishes us and sustains us with bread for the body and bread for the spirit. The Table is where God gathers us together in community, with those who are easy to love and with those who are difficult to love. We look at this Table and we see not only a reflection of God but also the reflection of who God enables us to be. This Table is God's way of holding up a mirror to us and saying, "Look! Look at who you are! Look at who you can be!"