

## Welcome

You know those snickers commercials that feature a celebrity in a strange situation. The first was a 2010 Super Bowl commercial featuring Betty White playing football with some random, much younger guys.

After a few seconds of shenanigans, someone hands the celeb a snickers bar, and when they eat it, they transform into someone who fits much better into the scene, and then the tagline comes up: You're not you when you're hungry.

Is it any wonder that commercial resonates? We all know what it feels like to go too long without food - we feel low energy, maybe even light headed. We get grumpy - or if we're trying to play off how grumpy we are, we call it 'hangry'.

We love the messaging that that person we are when we're hungry isn't the real us. They're a whole different person.

But of course, we know the truth, deep down - that person is us. Food has a power over us - one we don't tend to acknowledge, particularly in a society like ours where food is so plentiful. The vast majority of us have never known the pains of real hunger, the uncertainty of where the next meal is coming from. Even still, we know deep down that food is powerful. In fact, it's our ability to be a 'breadwinner' that defines many of us - and we understand that the most basic function of our work is to fill our bellies.

About 100 years after Jesus was born, a Roman satirist coined a phrase familiar to many of us. Juvenal wrote that the Roman people, though once great, have abdicated their power and "anxiously hopes for just two things: bread and circuses."

Food and entertainment. That phrase - bread and circuses - caught our collective imagination because we know it's true. If you entertain and feed us, we'll put up with almost anything. We'll give away our freedom for a little bit of food.

It was true in Rome's day and it's true today. But Jesus offers us something different - a way to say No to our desires. I want to explore the freedom Jesus invites us into today, a freedom that begins by insisting we are us when we're hungry - that hunger can, in fact, reveal who we really are. And it's only in that recognition we can begin our journey into God's freedom.

## Message

This is the second Sunday of Lent. Lent is our six week journey toward celebrating Jesus' resurrection at Easter. We prepare by walking with Jesus toward the cross - Lent is a season of introspection, confession and repentance. We root out sin in our spirits, our families, our church

and our world. We confess them to God and ask for God's help to live lives of justice and flourishing for everyone.

This year, our Lent series is "Bad Deal". We're exploring the nature of sin and temptation. Our English translations use a couple of different words for the same idea: testing and tempting. We think of temptation as always bad, but in the Bible, the idea of temptation is more neutral, like the word test (I know, I know - you folks in school still think of testing as bad). But tests are not in and of themselves bad. Tests reveal the state of our lives. They're an opportunity for us to see the truth of our lives. Do we really trust God? Or are we trusting something or someone else?

We began last week with our most basic test: natural cravings. To be human is to have desires. Our desires can be beautiful and they can be poison. How do we know which is which? We saw last week that God created our physical desires to draw us into relationship.

For each of these tests we're investigating, we're looking not only at how we navigate them, but how Jesus did.

Turn with us to Matthew 4.

Jesus' ministry began with his baptism. The very next thing he did was retreat into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting and prayer. And at the end of that time, the devil came to test him. To see if he was really ready for the road that lay ahead of him.

During this series, we're taking each temptation one at a time. Jesus' first test was about food (which is why we looked at food last week). So today, let's look at the first test the devil gives Jesus:

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.

During that time the devil came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread."

But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" -- Matthew 4:1-4

I have never personally gone 40 days without food (though I have some friends who have done a 40-day fast). But I get the impression that when Matthew tells us Jesus 'became very hungry', it was something of an understatement. So in the immediate sense, it's pretty easy to see what Jesus' temptation here is: he's hungry. The devil says, "Go ahead and make some food!"

On the surface, it's hard to see what the big deal is. Jesus has superpowers, and he can turn the stones into bread, so why not do it?

Well, in response, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy.

Turn with us to Deuteronomy 8.

Exodus through Deuteronomy are framed as Israel's journey out of slavery to freedom. Exodus opens with God's people in slavery in Egypt and Deuteronomy is basically Moses' parting words before his death and the people leave the wilderness and enter into the Promised Land. So Deuteronomy looks back at everything that happened in the previous three books, recapping and reinterpreting them. In this passage, Moses revisits the incident we explored last week, when the people complained that they'd rather be back in slavery because God was going to let them starve. Let's read Moses' interpretation of that event, some 40 years later:

“Be careful to obey all the commands I am giving you today. Then you will live and multiply, and you will enter and occupy the land the LORD swore to give your ancestors. Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands. Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. — Deuteronomy 8:1-3

According to Moses, God was testing Israel in those moments. God wanted to see what was in their hearts: were they really faithful to God? Or were they just in it for the meal ticket? No surprise: Israel failed the test. As soon as their stomachs started grumbling, they wanted to return to slavery.

The reason God kept them in the wilderness for 40 years was to prepare them, to teach them. To ensure they were ready for the freedom of the promised land. To teach them that their life and hope came not from the milk and honey of the Promised Land, nor from the meat in their pots in Egypt, but from their creator's provision and protection.

So Jesus quotes this verse to the devil: ‘we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.’ He's saying, “Yes, I'm hungry. But God brought me out here for a reason (remember - the Spirit led him into the wilderness). I trust that God is up to something, and that God won't let me starve. So I refuse to interrupt God's work to satisfy my cravings.”

Friends, that in and of itself is a powerful statement. To insist that our cravings do not rule us, that we understand they can lead us away from God and that we will submit them to God, rather than allow them to rule us.

I want to sit with that for a moment - especially for those of us who were here last week, since that's what we explored last week.

There's another, deeper aspect to this test. It's one explored by 19th century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky in his epic novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the middle of the novel, Dostoevsky has one brother tell another a story he calls "The Grand Inquisitor." This story stands on its own, and has become one of the most famous pieces of literature from the 19th century. The story finds Jesus returning to Earth incognito, just to scope things out. He's arrested by the grand inquisitor of the Church. What follows is a lengthy monologue where the inquisitor explains why Jesus should have accepted each of the devil's offers for the good of humanity.

Now, in case you're worried, yes, this is a satire. It was designed as Dostoevsky's critique of religious institutions and a commentary on humanity. So during this series, as we explore each of Jesus' tests, we're going to listen in to the grand inquisitor's perspective as well. Here's his take on the first test (If you're the son of Man, turn those stones into bread):

The first question, its meaning was this: "You would go into the world, and are going with empty hands, with some promise of freedom which humans in their simplicity and natural unruliness cannot even understand, which they fear and dread - for nothing has ever been more insupportable for a person and a human society than freedom. But do you see these stones in this parched and barren wilderness? Turn them into bread, and humankind will run after you like a flock of sheep, grateful and obedient though ever trembling, lest you withdraw your hand and deny them bread. — Fyodor Dostoevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor"

The inquisitor knows this is the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He knows Jesus is about to set out on a mission: to announce God's coming rule, and to invite everyday people to join him. To leave Rome's bread and circuses for the freedom of God's reality.

The inquisitor thinks that, if Jesus wants to succeed, he'd better take some bread with him. Because we're too small for freedom, in his view. Feed us, he says, give us bread and circuses, and we'll do whatever you want. We're too small to want anything else.

Now, before you think that's an oversimplification, I want you to turn with us to John 6. This is immediately following Jesus' miracle of feeding 5,000+ people. A story where he literally did what the grand inquisitor suggested - feed us! Watch what happens when the crowd runs out of food - it's eerily similar to what the grand inquisitor predicted (almost like Dostoevsky had read John 6 - weird!):

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the far shore saw that the disciples had taken the only boat, and they realized Jesus had not gone with them. Several boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the Lord had blessed the bread and the people had eaten. So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went across to Capernaum to look for him. They found him on the other side of the lake and asked, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, you want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs. But don’t be so concerned about perishable things like food. Spend your energy seeking the eternal life that the Son of Man can give you. For God the Father has given me the seal of his approval.”

They replied, “We want to perform God’s works, too. What should we do?” Jesus told them, “This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent.”

They answered, “Show us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe in you. What can you do? After all, our ancestors ate manna while they journeyed through the wilderness! The Scriptures say, ‘Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, Moses didn’t give you bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” — John 6:22-33

Jesus tells them that life is about more than food, that if they want true life, true freedom, they need to focus on Jesus, his work and message.

I think it’s hilarious that they push back by citing Scripture. They look around and say, here we are in the wilderness, following a guy who claims to speak for God. We remember another time this happened, except Moses gave them food! If you want us to believe you’re from God, feed us!

You see the trap - Jesus has already fed them. If a sign was all it took, then they already had the sign.

Jesus is trying to set his people free from the empires of bread and circuses. But all they can think about is where their next meal is coming from. They’re happy enough to stay under Caesar’s boot as long as he tosses them some crumbs.

But Jesus knows we were created for freedom - freedom that we cannot grasp so long as we’re ruled by our cravings. Or, as the grand inquisitor said:

They will understand themselves, at last, that freedom and bread enough for all are inconceivable together, for never, never will they be able to share between them! They will be convinced, too, that they can never be free, for they are weak, vicious, worthless and rebellious. You promised them the bread of Heaven, but, I repeat again, can it compare with earthly bread in the eyes of the weak, ever sinful and ignoble race of humanity? — Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor”

Friends, Lent is a season of confession, and we must begin by confessing the Grand Inquisitor isn’t wrong here. We far too often settle for bread and circuses. We’ll happily ignore the bodily trauma of our athletes if we’re entertained, much like Rome’s gladiators of old. How many of us

turn to a digital scroll or video games so we don't have to think about the complex issues of our day? How often does "Mommy Wine Time" become an excuse to ignore the reality of being overworked, overstressed and stretched too thin? How often does religion keep us from doing the difficult work of confession and repentance?

I know that sounds backwards but it's true (to the Inquisitor's point) - we can go through the motions of religion - prayer, song, study, service - without connecting with God at all. In fact, deeply religious persons can live deeply unjust lives. That was true in Jesus' day, and it's true today.

The question we have to ask is: are we following Jesus to make ourselves feel better in the moment? Or are we following Jesus because we know his way leads to true life?

Do we want food and pleasure in the moment? Or are we committed to the process of becoming truly human?

Do we give ourselves to Rome's bread and circuses? Or are we learning to crave the bread that comes from heaven?

Friends this is why the practice of fasting is so important. When we fast, we choose to go without those things we use to numb, those things we use as crutches so we can learn to interrogate our desires. We can learn that we truly do not live by bread alone, but by the life spoken by our God.

## Communion + Examen

At Jesus' table, we receive a meal of sacrifice and an invitation to follow him.

1. When in the last week have I chosen Jesus' way?
2. When in the last week have I settled, numbed or avoided discomfort rather than seeking Jesus' invitation to grow?
3. When in the next week might I be tempted to settle, numb or avoid?
4. How can I choose to be present to Jesus' work in my life this week?

## Assignment + Blessing

Fasting!