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Matthew 4:1-11
Sermon Preached for the Duke Youth Academy
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“The Gifts of God”

Like all of you Jesus is a gifted young person. Our scripture reading takes place at the beginning of his ministry. He's not all that much older than most of you. The people back in Nazareth, his home-town, think highly of him. Jesus is no doubt respectful, articulate, bright, a good student, the president of his youth group. In the passage we have just read, Jesus has just come from his baptism, a spiritual high where the heavens have opened up and he has been claimed as God's child.

Then Jesus sets out to face the world and he is led into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, which in the bible means a really long time. I can imagine Jesus, all alone under a hot sun, day after day, getting hungrier and lonelier by the hour. Jesus must have been made of sterner stuff than I, because if the days were long, then the lonely nights must have been even longer. Finally, when Jesus is at his hungriest and loneliest, when he is probably wondering what in the world did that baptism mean anyway, it's then that the devil begins to tempt him.

Matthew tells us that there are three temptations. Jesus is famished, he hasn't eaten for forty days and forty nights, and the devil says you can eat Jesus, turn these stones into bread, you've got the power, use it! But Jesus says no. And then Jesus is whisked away to the top of the temple and the devil says, “you've got the gift of power,” Jesus, test your power, throw yourself down and the angels will protect you. Again, Jesus says no. And finally the devil takes Jesus to the top of a mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and he says, if you worship me you can have it all Jesus, you'll be in charge, you'll be the man, you'll have the prestige. People will be in awe of you. The world will think you are successful. The only catch, you'll have to deny that pesky little baptism, and worship me.

At the end of the day these three temptations are about Jesus' identity. Who are you Jesus, and how will you use your God given gifts? Are you the one who was baptized in the River Jordan, who came out of those baptismal waters committed to living as God would have you live in the world, using your God given gifts to heal the sick, bind up the broken hearted, to stick up for the forgotten, and advocate on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

Or are you going to sell out, give in and take the easy way, chasing after trivial, hallow things like power, popularity, success, and prestige. How will you use your gifts, Jesus, for God and others, or for yourself. This is the test that Jesus is facing. And it is the test that every one of us faces everyday of our lives. Are we going to be God's child, living as baptized followers of Christ, using our God given gifts on behalf of others, or will we give in to the temptations around us and use our gifts for only ourselves.

As you all know, discerning what is of God and what is not is hard. As Jesus discovers, we are tempted precisely in those things that we want the most, in the places that we are the most gifted. When I was in high school, I wasn't very popular. I wasn't a

great athlete. I struggled getting a date. I felt like a loner a lot of the time. I had this one friend who was just the popular kid in school. He was a great athlete, a great student, and he had his pick of girlfriends. Finally I asked him one day, you've got to help me, you are my hero, I said how is it that you do so well with girls. And he said, oh, that, oh it's so easy, he said, "I lie to them. I tell them whatever it is they want to hear."

And that's how temptation works in our lives. We all know that the devil doesn't go around dressed up in a red suit with a pitchfork and funny tail. If he did our lives would be easy, we'd see the devil and take off for the hills, we wouldn't think twice. But temptation is far more subtle than that. The tempter tells us exactly what we want to hear.

It's sort of like what CS Lewis said about us, he said "if we consider the unblushing and staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

We have been given the great blessing of living the heroic adventurous life of a baptized Christian in the world and too often we throw it away, we get caught up in a rat race, giving chase to that empty American dream of fame, fortune, and security, and before you know it, we've become just like everyone else. I recall a sermon when I was in college where the preacher told us, "just remember, even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat." When I was a junior in high school going through a particularly difficult time, feeling like I didn't fit in and never would, and I went to my youth pastor and said I just wish I could be like everybody else. And to his credit, he said, be like everybody else? How boring is that? Don't be like everybody else. Be the person God has created you to be. Use the gifts God has given you.

Mother Theresa knew this well. She didn't fit in. God was calling her to do something different with her life. She was asked once, "Mother, how is it that you are so holy? And she said, "you act as if holiness is abnormal, for those of us who follow Jesus, holiness should be normal, the rest of the world is abnormal."

In my job here at Duke I work as a minister to college students. I talk with them about what is going on in their lives, school, parents, and relationships. Often I talk with them about what they want to do when they graduate, how they will decide what they are going to do with their lives.

This is a hard question and perhaps the most important question we will ever ask. I suggest that God works through the people around us. And so I tell them to go and talk with their close friends, people who have known them for a long time, people they trust, and ask them, what do you see as my gifts? Where do you see my gifts working in the world?

I love what Frederick Buechner says about discerning the Spirit, he says God is calling you precisely where your great gifts and passions meet the world's deep needs. That intersection forms a cross, Buechner says, pick it up, and carry it, to new life.

Every single one of you have been given gifts. You are all very intelligent. Some of you are great musicians or great athletes. Many of you are artistic and creative. You are charming and sensitive and compassionate. God has gifted you with these and many other things. Everyday of your life you will face the same decisions that Jesus faced.

Will you use those gifts for yourself, to make yourself look better, for power, prestige, popularity, and success? Or will use them to glorify God, to serve others, to find someplace in the world that is hurting and use your gifts to bring healing.

On Sunday morning I told you how in the movie Spiderman 2, Spiderman comes to a crossroads in his life. It's a crossroads that every one of us will face many times. He has been given this great gift, but with it comes responsibility. He has been using his gifts for good in the world, to serve others, to make his community better, but it has meant he's had to push some of his own desires to the side. He could use his gifts to make a lot of money, but that would be unethical. He could reveal his identity to the girl he loves, but it would put her in danger. He is tempted to be selfish, to keep those gifts to himself, to return to his regular old Peter Parker kind of life, just fitting in, just being like everyone else.

Then his wise aunt Maye, one of those people in his life who knows him well and loves him says the following, and I think it's worth listening to again: "I believe there is a hero in all of us; that keeps us honest, gives us strength, makes us noble, and finally allows us to die with pride, even though sometimes we have to be steady, and give up the thing we want the most... even our dreams."

Sometimes we have to put those dreams aside, and ask, what would God want me to do with my gifts? Where is there a deep need in the world that my gifts can fill? At times we'll be tempted to turn back, to take an easier road, to go in another direction.

In CS Lewis' novel, the Silver Chair, the girl Jill finds that she is alone in a strange land, tempted to run back home where it is safe and secure. She is lonely, hungry, and thirsty, and then she sees a stream with a lion resting next to it.

"May I...could I ...would you mind going away while I [drink]" said Jill. The Lion answered with a look and a very low growl and as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic. Do you promise not to do anything to me if I do come" said Jill. "I make no promise," said the Lion. Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

"Do you eat girls?" she said. "I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.. "I daren't come and drink," said Jill. "Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion. "Oh, dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then." "There is no other stream," said the Lion.

Friends you have been baptized in the waters of life, claimed as God's own child, and given gifts to use for others in the world. Like Jill in front of the stream. Keep going forward. Don't turn back. The adventure is too exciting. You have brothers and sisters on the journey to help guide you, and just as God has given you gifts to use for others, so, too God has given us the gift of himself, in bread to nourish our lives, in drink to sustain our lives. And if, out there in the wilderness of life, you get hungry and tired, lonely and weary, when you are tempted to forget who you are and whose you are, that's okay, it happens to all of us; it even happened to Jesus. Come back to this table because you see it's always open and God is always ready to give his gifts to us. Amen.

