

Why Jesus? Because Jesus is Light.  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

**Matthew 4:1-17 NRSV**

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

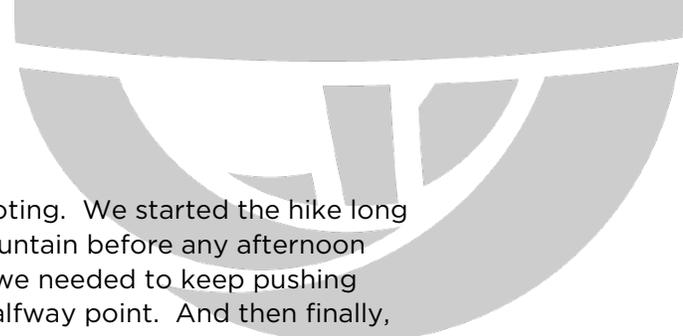
<sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not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

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

<sup>12</sup>Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. <sup>13</sup>He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup>so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: <sup>15</sup>“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— <sup>16</sup>the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” <sup>17</sup>From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

My son Erik and I took a trip to Colorado this past August. We were going to do some camping and hiking in Rocky Mountain Park. It was a wonderful trip. The only serious complication was a strong wind that blew one night and destroyed the outside rain layer of our tent. But not to worry: we were able to get a small replacement tent at the camp store. Let’s just say, we were quite cozy in our new sleeping quarters.

On the last day of the trip, we were going to try to climb Long’s Peak. It’s a great challenge, something to prove what we’re made of. It’s 16 miles round trip, about a mile in



elevation gain, and has several slopes with precarious footing. We started the hike long before sunrise. The goal was to get to the top of the mountain before any afternoon storms might develop. The morning light was just what we needed to keep pushing forward. Eventually, we reached the Key Hole, a good halfway point. And then finally, after 7 hours and lots of strenuous climbing and any number of precarious ledges, we reached our destination. The view from the top was fabulous. It was just the perspective we needed to head back down the mountain and start the journey home.

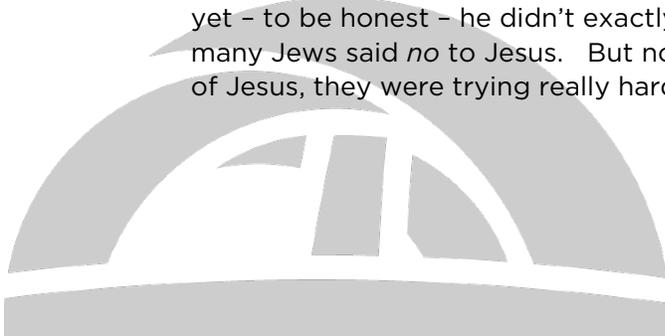
Fast forward 7 weeks. I was once again crawling around on steep and precarious footing. You know this story. I was not so fortunate this time around. If it wasn't for some excellent medical attention, and lots and lots of encouragement from family and friends, and an avalanche of prayers, I wouldn't be standing before you today.

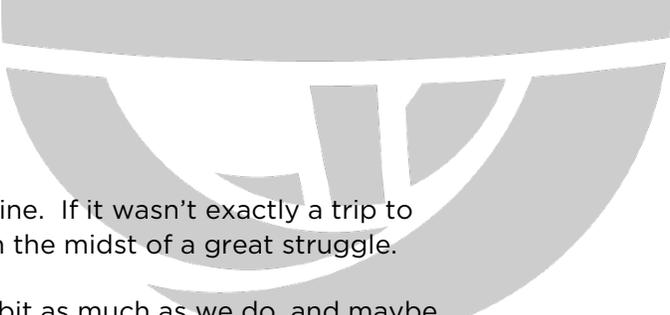
My earliest recollection of my tumble off the ladder and the time in the ICU was a series of questions that came my way each day. The questions sounded like a voice from beyond: "Pastor Christopherson, you've been in an accident." For some unexplainable reason, that voice transported me to top of Long's Peak. There were three questions: First: *Do you know what day it is?* I always got that one wrong. Finally, all I could manage was a smart-alecky comeback: "Maybe Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday." Second question: *Do you know where you are?* After two or three times of not knowing, and then being told by medical personnel, I was finally able to say: "I bet I'm in St. Marys Hospital in Rochester, MN, but I really have no idea why." Third question: *Do you know who the president of the United States is?* Believe it or not, I got that one right every time - "It's Donald Trump." That question identified me as an American and living in the great state of Minnesota.

In a hard-to-explain sort of way, those questions grounded me. They gave me perspective. There in the ICU, I was being tested like I'd never been tested before. It was certainly far harder than climbing a mountain. Those tests located me in a time and a place and - confused as I was - they helped me to establish an identity that somewhere along the way had gotten lost. I was a patient in St. Marys Hospital, in Rochester, MN, with a traumatic brain injury, and lots of aches and pains. Slowly a truth began to settle in: the journey forward was going to be long and hard. I would need lots of help and healing every step of the way.

The Gospel of Matthew was probably written near the end of the first century. It was meant for a struggling little band of believers. They were Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Here's the deal. There were days when believing in Jesus felt a little like being out on a steep and precarious ledge, and they were hanging on for dear life. Somewhere along the way they either left the synagogue or the synagogue had kicked them out. And their identity had gotten lost.

So now what? The only real scripture they knew was what we call the Old Testament. The only real way of ordering their lives was around the 10 Commandments and some of the other 600 or so laws in their tradition. Still, the stories about Jesus had touched their hearts. Jesus said he didn't come to abolish the Law and Prophets, but to fulfill them. And yet - to be honest - he didn't exactly do everything by the good book. And that's why so many Jews said *no* to Jesus. But not Matthew's community. They said *yes*. As disciples of Jesus, they were trying really hard to be faithful in a world that had gotten turned





upside down. The Gospel was written to offer them a lifeline. If it wasn't exactly a trip to the ER, but it was at least a first aid manual for a church in the midst of a great struggle.

I'm sure they were asking the question *Why Jesus?* every bit as much as we do, and maybe more. Note that Matthew didn't just tell them simple stories about Jesus' life. He told stories intended to convey the essence of who Jesus was and why he had come. The Magi were Gentiles who came on a long journey to visit the newborn. Why? Because they sensed Jesus was a brand new king and he was born for everyone. Jesus got baptized in the Jordan River. Why? Because he was God's beloved Son, and baptism would soon be a way for followers of Jesus to be God's beloved children too, and to be in relationship with him and with each other.

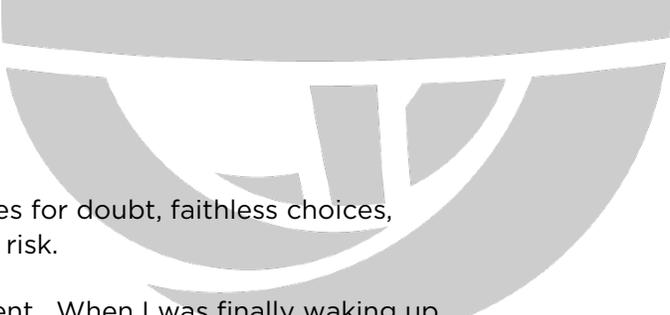
Now comes the Temptation story. At first glance, the Temptation is less about doing something we really want to do but know we shouldn't - like eating a second piece of chocolate cream pie - and more about the tests that come our way. Matthew suggests that believers are often tested much like Jesus was.

This week, as I read the story in context, I was stuck by how Jesus' situation was a little like the situation I had faced in the hospital. First question: *Do you know what day it is?* Matthew tells us: John the Baptist has been arrested. John is the hinge between the old age and the new. Now it's time for Jesus the Messiah to come. Second question: *Do you know where you are?* After John's arrest, Jesus withdraws to Galilee. Matthew mentions the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali and hints of good news even for the Gentiles. He quotes Isaiah 9: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." And Matthew can hardly contain himself: That light is not just for Jews; it's for everyone. Third question: *Do you know who the president of the United States is?* Okay, maybe this last one's a stretch, but it does speak to the identity of those early disciples, and where they belong, and how Jesus has come to give them a purpose they did not have before: "Repent, Jesus says, turn around toward me, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Matthew enlarges the story of Jesus' testing. It's not accidental that it's placed right after his baptism. *What's Jesus made of?* We'll soon find out. When we picture the devil in this story, we're not to imagine a Halloween figure with a pitchfork and a red cape. In scripture, the devil or Satan represents any power of evil that stands in the way of God's intension for us. The devil's questions are insidious. They get right to the heart of Jesus' identity: 1) "Jesus, if you really are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread. The devil is luring Jesus to make the nature of his work too small - satisfying hunger - and the recipients of his work too few - only himself. 2) "Jesus, if you really are God's Beloved Son, throw yourself down from the temple. After all, God has promised that the angels will catch you when you fall; you won't even get a scratch." According to the devil, putting God to the test is a sign of faith. But according to Jesus, it's really not. It's more a sign of doubt than anything. 3) "Jesus, I will give you all the kingdoms of the world if you will only fall down and worship me." The devil points out: "Clearly, you have a long road ahead of you, Jesus. Why not take a shortcut? Cut out the suffering, the painful choices, the self-sacrifice." And to that offer Jesus gives an unqualified *no*.



Again, these temptations are meant to confirm Jesus' identity: Will he be all that God's intends for him to be? So too for Matthew's community - and for us - there are temptations to be something other than who God intends for us to be; to deny that we are



God's children. As such, they symbolize all the possibilities for doubt, faithless choices, and unholy distractions to which God's people are ever at risk.

To be honest, I had some of these feelings after my accident. When I was finally waking up from it – maybe a couple of weeks later – I slowly began to realize what people had been telling me: I had lost vision in my right eye. It was a hard blow. As I mentioned in *The Way Things Look from Here*, there were days when I felt plenty sorry for myself. I wondered why I should even try to keep going, and if I did, where would I find the strength? I felt darkness. At the heart of it, I needed Christ to shine light on me as never before.

In the midst of the darkness, I was deeply moved at how often something would happen to pull me out of it. One day Glen Monson, Ruth's husband, called me out of the blue. He said: "Vern, you need to know that when I was a pastor in Austin, I got t-boned by a car and...I broke my neck clean in half. The doctors told me I was lucky, because if I had broken a couple other vertebrae, I would have been paralyzed. It took me almost a year, but I came back from it." Another day I got a call from a friend who reminded me that I wasn't doing this alone. People believed in me and loved me, and I had a lot to live for." On still another day, I bumped into someone from my previous congregation at physical therapy. She said, "Pastor Vern, we were telling your story about losing an eye to a friend from Arizona. He shared, 'I've only got one eye.' Here, we'd known the man for the last 50 years and never realized it. And get this, my husband said he was a pretty good golfer." Just then the receptionist chimed in, "I've only got one eye. I lost my other to cancer when I was a child. I never think twice about it." And finally, one day I met someone named Aaron. Instantly I remembered a January day years ago. A man named Aaron had stopped to change a flat tire for a woman stranded by the side of the road. Just as he was getting the tire out of the trunk, a car came speeding up the shoulder going 60 mph. Aaron lost both his legs in the blink of an eye. I was Aaron's pastor. I was amazed that, even if he felt a deep sadness over his loss, never once did he give in to self-pity and anger. I was so moved by Aaron that he and I did the Thanksgiving sermon together, and Aaron talked about gratitude and why it's so very important in our lives.

Each one of these episodes and many more besides – including the cards you sent and contacts you made – were little streams of light shining my way. I was back to the view from Long's Peak. I was reminded that everyone has something they're carrying around. All of us need help and hope and encouragement from others.

Why Jesus? Because Jesus is Light. In a world of change, with lots of precarious ledges, he gives us a time and a place and an identity to ground us. Sometimes, during the tests of life, we need that light every bit as much as Matthew's community. And sometimes, we are the bearers of that light for each other. And when we are, hopefully it's like a first aid manual, just the lifeline people need at just the right time. Way to go, God! Amen.

