

WHAT IF?
Matthew 4:1-11
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Have you ever wondered, “What if?” How would history or your life be different if choices were made that lead to different conclusions?

For instance, a 15 year old Virginia boy with the support of his older brother almost joined the navy. His bags were packed, he was ready to go, but at the last minute his mother changed her mind and wouldn’t let him go. “What if” George Washington’s mother gave her blessing, how would history be different?

Another example. In the late 1940’s a promising young ball player tried out for the New York Yankees, but he was cut. “What if” Fidel Castro was on the top of his game that day, got signed up and became a sports legend, how would history be different?

The final example. What if Jesus gave into those temptations just before he began his ministry? How would the world be different? How would you and I be different?

Let’s speculate. If Jesus gave in and took the easy way out, then the Church could never become a worldwide movement of faithfulness and servanthood, and Jesus could have become just another ego-driven, controlling religious leader. Thankfully, Jesus never gave in, and yet, when you look at Church history the evidence shows the Church consistently gave into the same temptations Jesus resisted.

Bear with me for a few minutes as I give you a brief review of early Church history.

As you read the book of Acts, you get a sense of what the Church is supposed to look like. Sure, the early Church wasn’t perfect, as Paul’s letters to the first congregations reveal, but by and large the Church started out on the right foot. The earliest Christians took the gospel seriously, so much so they were willing to die for Christ rather than submit to Caesar. When the persecutions began the Church went underground, yet despite the danger the gospel spread like wildfire.

Mind you, there was no freedom of religion and no tax exempt status for the church property. In fact there wasn’t any church property, the people met in homes, in the fields, out in the woods.

But as time went on, toleration of Christians evolved until the Christian Church became the state religion of the Roman Empire. Imagine, over the course of several hundred years the Church was persecuted, then tolerated, and finally officially embraced!

Wonderful news, right? Not exactly, because the Church, once a Spirit led movement of dedicated disciples who were willing to die for Christ, was now absorbed into the secular culture. Sure, there were still plenty of Christians who took discipleship seriously, but the Church itself became a hierarchical institution, and an arm of the state, until the Roman Empire fell apart and then the Church effectively became the state, acquiring land, wealth and power. Let me repeat that: the Church acquired land, wealth and power. What were they thinking?

Question, do you think when Jesus said, “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church,” he envisioned his Church would become a power hungry institution that acquired land, wealth and power, or would Jesus have wanted his Church to resist that temptation and instead acquire deeds of kindness, acts of love, plus the desire for justice and peace in the land?

Immediately following his baptism the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to struggle with what it would mean for him to be the Suffering Messiah, or not to be the Suffering Messiah. What if Jesus gave into temptation and took the easy way out?

Let’s revisit those three temptations. First Satan challenged, “Turn these stones into bread.” Jesus was hungry from fasting. Certainly it was tempting to break his fast, but Satan was especially tempting Jesus to abuse his powers to “enhance” his ministry. Want the people to follow you? Promise them security, give them what they want, tell them what they want to hear; buy their allegiance by promising them prosperity. Forget this “deny yourself” nonsense, throw them a party.”

Very tempting, a gospel of prosperity and entitlement, but Jesus resisted. Instead he would be a servant Messiah, living by faith one day at a time, giving himself away, never afraid there’d be nothing left over for himself. Think of it. Jesus never bribed people with freebies instead he called them to discover their true humanity through sacrificial love

Next Satan tempted Jesus into performing a cheap publicity stunt. “Want to become an instant celebrity? Then grab attention fast. Jump off the temple and the crowds of pilgrims below will see you being saved by angels just in the nick of time. You’ll become instantly famous, the most important person on the planet even more than Caesar. Your friends will love you; your enemies will fear you, no one will ever question your authority.

Satan’s third temptation was all about control. “Let me be your power broker. Submit to my way and take over. Get everybody under your thumb. Force people to do your bidding. Demand their allegiance. If they refuse, punish them, so everyone else will fall in line.”

Jesus resisted this three-pronged attack. He refused to become wealthy at the expense of others, he wouldn’t make false promises and become the center of attention, he wouldn’t control everybody. Just the opposite, he would remain poor, and be a

servant, lowering himself to raise others up. Leading by example he modeled for his Church how to minister to the world.

Unfortunately, the historical evidence shows the Church lost her way. Bloody religious wars, inquisitions, forced conversions and power politics stain the record, and yet Christ continued to love his Church by raising up incredible saints throughout the ages, who challenged the Church's abuse of power through simple yet significant ministries true to the way of Jesus.

Now, what does all of this have to do with us as individuals and as members of Babcock?

Let's begin with that "what if" question. What if Jesus gave in to Satan's temptations, what would be the consequences? For starters, there'd be no Good Friday, no Easter morning, no grace, no hope, no love. Christ's ministry would have collapsed before it even started and his legacy to the world would be more of the same, the struggle for wealth, power and ego gratification.

Thankfully Jesus resisted his temptations. Crucified for the sins of the world on Good Friday, he was raised up on Easter morning and now he's as alive today as he was 2000 years ago, and through his risen presence we are empowered to resist the same temptations and be faithful to his way.

Here's another "What if" question. What if we consistently resisted the temptation to wealth, power and ego gratification? How would our lives be different and the world around us be different because we, the Church, chose the more excellent way? What if we listened hard for that voice and we heard God calling us to reach outside of ourselves, just like Jesus, and become real servants to our neighbors? What if we mobilized all our god-given resources and gave them back to God saying, "Do with us and our wealth as you will?" How might Loch Raven Village, and beyond be different?

As we begin the Season of Lent, I urge you to listen for God's voice calling you to faith and servanthood. So if you want to be Christ-like and our congregation's ministry to be Christ-like, consider this, what if you and I took our calling to discipleship seriously. How would you be different, how would your family life be different, how would your work place be different, how would your neighborhood be different?

Then consider this, if you don't take Jesus and all these others this seriously how would things be different. Nothing would be different, it would stay the same. Did Jesus die for that?

Christ resisted his temptations, and despite our sin, so we can resist the temptation to play it safe and live only for ourselves, if we follow Jesus to where he wants to take us.

Let us pray.