

Face to Face With Jesus – Rising to the Test

Matthew 4: 1-11

February 10, 2008

Have you ever come face-to-face with someone you admired but never met or a famous and were surprised in some way by that encounter? That happened to me on my 40th birthday when Katie surprised me with a dinner party at the Omni Hotel in Houston. As a golf nut, Katie picked out the perfect present. At the last professional tournament of the year, in Houston that year, the top thirty money leaders were gathered in late October. At a charity event, the PGA Player's spouses teamed up with the top chefs in Houston for a celebrity cook-off. In the ballroom at terrific serving stations featuring delicious food were the greatest players in professional golf with the city's greatest chefs. Now Katie and I honeymooned at Sea Island resort in coastal Georgia. Davis Love III, a great golfer and touring pro from Sea Island was right in front of me in the room. So I got up my courage and introduced myself to this idol. I told him of our honeymoon at Sea Island and my parents who lived in nearby St. Simon's Island. Now former president George R. Bush has just made his way into the party with his entourage and was glad-handing around the room with all these golf stars. Davis smiled as I told my story and said, "You know, George and Barbara Bush honeymooned at Sea Island as well." I beamed, "I know." He then said, "Wait a second." He then yelled across the room at the former president, "Hey George, come here!" My heart leaped and got stuck in my throat. Suddenly I found myself book-ended by one of my favorite golfers and the first president I had ever met. I noticed how tall they both were – much taller

and athletic than I had seen on TV or had imagined. As President Bush spoke to me with his warm, animated eyes, I thought to myself, "Lord, you can just take me now!" I have a very sketchy recollection of the small talk that took place over those few minutes but I remember being surprised how good they both looked with their tans and athletic builds. Have you ever had the chance to meet a childhood idol or a hero that you always revered? What did you do? Did they disappoint you or reaffirm your romantic ideals?

What if you could meet Jesus face to face? Would you focus on his facial expressions...or his eyes...or the sound of his voice? Would you be poised enough to listen closely to his wise words? Our task for these Sundays of Lent leading to the cross and open tomb of Easter will be to try in our gospel texts to meet face-to-face with Jesus. We will look for surprises and for applications for our own lives, as we desire a closer walk with the living Christ.

Our first installment is to eavesdrop on the dialog between Jesus and the tempter in the gospel of Matthew. The first surprise, not in the facial expression of Jesus but in the literal scene, is that what Jesus reported through the oral tradition and into the written text was really an internal struggle going on in his soul. For you see Jesus was fresh from his baptism in which God had revealed his calling to public ministry. As Jesus went off to be alone, he reflected on what that ministry should be versus his own desires and the expectations of the people around him. The second surprise comes in the Greek-to-English translation. The word *parazein* denotes both temptation and testing or trial. Both are valid, but in this context I think testing is

the more appropriate rendering of the word. For wouldn't it be the case, just as Jesus resolves for a new trajectory to his life that doubts, uncertainties, and other spiritual trials would leap into his soul? Isn't that the way it works for us when a new calling screams in our soul? We are tested and go through trials.

So what are the literal and figurative tests that Jesus goes through and how does he respond? Bread-like limestone was all over the Judean wilderness. The limestone on the ground looked like little loaves of bread. Jesus was really hungry, but by using his power to simply feed himself would have been selfish. In addition, to feed others around him would have been like buying off their allegiance to follow him. I don't know if Jesus was in one of those HALT situations (hungry-angry-lonely or tired), but I imagine he had more than one of those physical situations going on. He responds by resting on the promise of Scripture and is able to sacrifice short-term gratification for long-term fulfillment of purpose. Think of how good it feels in our souls when we are able to do that as well. Usually our perspective is so short, isn't it? I read that when a terrible plague came to ancient Athens, people there committed every horrible crime and engaged in every destructive pleasure they could because they believed that life was short and they would never have to pay any penalty. In one of the world's most famous poems, the Latin poet Catullus wrote, "Let us live and let us love, and let us value the tales of austere old men at a single halfpenny. Suns can set and then return again, but for us, when once our brief light sets, there is but one perpetual night through which we must sleep." Delaying gratification is really hard to do, but when we do our souls soar.

In the second testing there was expectation that the messiah would just miraculously show up at the Jerusalem Temple. This inner voice was one that Jesus would hear. But to do a dramatic miracle for the people by throwing himself off the temple mount for God to rescue would incite them into expecting bigger and bigger miracles. It would encourage a “circus” mentality rather than a servant mentality. God’s providence is not something to be experimented with, but to quietly trust in everyday life. At another level this testing speaks to us who put ourselves in pickles everyday and then expect God to bail us out. Sometime we expect God through the local church to work this way as well. Did you hear about the pious man who found himself in a torrential rainstorm that resulted in a rapid flood of his neighborhood? The rain came up in torrents over the sidewalk. He went to pray in his living room. He heard an EMS man pounding at his door, asking him to open the door so he could be rescued. He refused saying that he was praying for God to come to his rescue. The waters rose further so he went up to his bedroom. A motorboat came down the street again imploring him to jump and get in the boat. He refused saying that he was praying for God to rescue him. Finally he had to get out on his roof. A helicopter came to his house, lowering a ladder for him to climb aboard. One more time he refused as he fervently prayed. Finally a current swept him away and he was drowned. In heaven he asked God why God had not answered his prayer. God said, “Man, first I sent an EMS man, then a boat and finally a helicopter. What kind of sign were you waiting for?” Don’t always expect the most dramatic signs but simpler whispers from God to test your faith.

In the third testing on the mountain, we recognize that this is a metaphorical scene, not a literal one. God made the same promise in psalm 2:8 – to give all the kingdoms of the earth. The first commandment is always one against the essence of polytheism – that is to hedge one’s bets! Compromise with you and me will surely get your way. Diversification strategies may rule our investing plans, but they should never rule our spiritual life. God doesn’t say invest 50% in me, 40% in the God of the Sun and 10% in Venus and you are sure to win. No, God says, “I want 100% of you!” That’s always our greatest temptation – to hedge our bets. In pursuit of various powers (comfort, security, prestige) we substitute compromise and spiritual “diversification” for surrender to the one true God. Peter gives us the best example of placing all his trust in Jesus when the chips are really down. Many of Jesus’ followers had left him, finding his teachings too difficult to follow. It comes from the 6th chapter of John’s gospel. Jesus asks Peter if he wants to leave with the others. Peter says, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!” Peter bet his whole life on Jesus. Even promises of an easier life did not get his attention.

So when is the last time you saw Jesus face to face? Maybe you saw him in the face of one you were called to show compassion. Maybe you saw Jesus in the Eucharist. Maybe you encountered Jesus in the reading of Scripture. During our spiritual walks over Lent, expect to encounter Jesus. Expect to be changed. Be open to Jesus’ voice calling you into new possibilities and new relationships.