

Sermon Series: Falling into Goodness  
Sermon Title: Dwell with God  
Matthew 4:1-11

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Over the next several weeks we'll be reflecting upon what it means to *fall into the goodness of God* and become more fully the person God has uniquely created each one of us to be. Our sermons, in this series, will be built around readings from Chuck DeGroat's book, *Falling into Goodness*. You can pick up a copy in the office and we encourage you read along.

I also want to encourage us to make the most of this time, this season. Recently, I and our staff and leaders have been talking a lot about discipleship and how we believe God is calling us to more - to more than attendance, to more than membership, calling us to the fullness of life in Christ. The world needs disciples, and by that I mean devoted followers of Jesus, people who not only believe in Jesus but believe in the things Jesus believed in. Lent is a perfect season for us to lean into Christ's invitation for us to be his disciples and for Boone UMC to be an intentional disciple-making community. Lent, you see, is a gift, it is a gift of time given to us to pray, and worship, and study, and serve and prayerfully reflect upon our life with Christ. It's a time to throw ourselves upon the mercy of God, to ask God to forgive us for the ways in which our lives have become out of sync with what Jesus was about, and then to allow God to infuse us with God's grace that we might come to love God and neighbor with the perfect love of Christ. In this holy season we are invited once again to devote ourselves anew to following Jesus in whom we discover the goodness of a God who longs to raise us to new and abundant life.

And so, in that spirit let us hear the word of the Lord from the gospel according to Matthew.

*4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> He fasted 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.

Jesus was tempted. And Jesus was tempted because he was like us, fully human. Yes, Jesus is also God and was without sin, but he knew the temptation of envy, of unrighteous anger, of lust, of wrestling with what it means to follow God. Remember, after all, Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” (Matthew 26:39) Jesus was like us in every way, and precisely because he was fully human he elevates our humanity, temptations and all, to the very gates of heaven.

But what does it mean, for you and me, that Jesus was tempted? What does this story say to us about our life with God? Most of us would probably not claim that Satan or some demon had literally come to us and tempted us to engage in this or that behavior, especially temptations like Jesus faced, turning stones into bread, throwing ourselves off a high building, so what are we to make of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness? What difference does it make for us if Jesus was tempted and if it does make any difference what does it say to us as we give ourselves to being his disciples?

In reflecting upon the reality of temptation, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Karl Barth was once asked, concerning the Genesis passage where Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent, “Do you honestly believe that the serpent spoke in an audible voice?” To which Barth replied, “I certainly do. I hear it every day.”

This was Barth’s way of saying that we all are tempted by something or someone to deny who we are, to turn our backs on the God who gave us life, to choose our own selves, our own will over the will of God and the needs of our neighbor. We’re all tempted. In some way we all hear the serpent’s voice. The nudge, the push, the internal wrestling with God, the temptation to seek our own way, to be, as Wesley would say, “almost Christian”, being attenders and not disciples, to avoid the cross and the demands of the gospel. You see, the thing about temptation is that it is subtle and attractive. Most of us aren’t tempted to do horrible things, we’re tempted to do things that seem attractive, maybe even good. Love someone, make money, be a success, a good citizen, follow our dreams. The problem is when these good things begin to take the place of God. What is wrong with turning stones into bread and feeding people, or with Jesus ruling the world, or demonstrating God’s power through miracles? The problem is when we are tempted to do those

things for ourselves, for our own benefit, our own glory, our own well-being, rather than as a way of pointing to the presence and power of God's Kingdom. The problem is when life, or Church, or our life of faith, become about me, and getting me to where I want to be in life and not about loving the way God loves. The problem is when we rely upon ourselves, focus on succeeding for ourselves, rather than falling into the goodness of God and relying upon the Spirit of God at work within us, to make us more like Jesus.

Chuck DeGroat very intentionally chooses a passage from John's gospel to name his book and describe our life with God. John writes, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24)

I remember as a kid when we would sow wheat, I drove the truck and would drive out to the field and refill the bins on the seed drill when they were empty so my dad could keep planting and not lose track of the location in the field where he had last sowed seed. The drill would plant the seeds of wheat in perfect rows.

And very quickly a field of dirt would become covered with neat rows of green shoots of wheat and eventually, with enough rain and sun, an abundant harvest.

All that potential for life, for fruitfulness, in a tiny little seed. "But unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth it remains just a single grain." The good seed of our hearts and lives can so easily fall into sin when we lean into temptation, when we neglect our life with God. And when we allow this to happen, our lives remain small, just a single grain. But instead, if we fall into the goodness of God and dwell with God, the single grain of our lives bears much fruit.

Lent gives us the opportunity to pause, to be still, to listen, to examine our lives and be honest about the ways in which we are tempted, and to confess the ways we have given into those temptations so that God then might breathe new life into these dusty lives of ours. Jesus was tempted just like us; tempted to rely on his own potential, his own strength. He was tempted to believe the lie that is as old as humanity itself, the lie that says we don't really need God and we can by our own effort have it all. "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, you can have it all, if you deny who you are, and fall down and worship me." That's what Adam and Eve thought, the Pharisees, Pilate and Herod, and you and me, anytime we are tempted to cling to the single grain of our lives, thinking that if we keep a tight grip on it, maintain control, we can have it all. But Jesus shows us that in clinging to our lives they remain small and all that potential for a fruitful, abundant life is wasted. Only when we let go of our lives, and allow them to fall into the goodness of God can they become what God intended for them to be.

DeGroat reminds us of the good news in the story of Jesus' temptation, "If God is God, then we don't have to be. We can give up our relentless, exhausting attempt to be more than we are – richer, sexier, smarter, stronger. We can stand atop that mountain with Jesus and remember that 'everything God has is already ours.' We don't need anything more. God is God, you and I are not, and that's the bottom line. If we can remember that truth, then we can receive, and rest..."<sup>1</sup> and allow our lives to fall into the goodness of God. And when we let go and fall into God, God will catch us and hold us. I know, we are tempted to settle for less than the life God longs to give us, tempted to think we can have it all if we just hold on tightly enough. But Jesus shows us, if we'll only let go, just let the seed drop into the soil, God will make more of our life than we could ever imagine.

So where do we go from here? If I want to dwell with God and fall into the goodness of God what do I do next? Well, first, it's probably helpful to acknowledge that before we desire God, God desires and has been seeking us. God wants us to have abundant life and to bear much fruit. We don't have to convince God of that. God is always waiting for us to confess the ways our lives have become out of sync with God's will and to turn around and fall into God's embrace. So maybe one of the ways we begin to dwell with God is by simply acknowledging that God is the *all* we desire. Satan offered Jesus the Kingdoms of the world. Jesus knew that could never fill the God-shaped space within our hearts. Only God can satisfy the longing of our hearts. So maybe we begin, this Lent, by confessing the ways we've tried to have it all by filling the God-shaped space in our hearts with all the stuff - relationships, material possessions, power, success, religion – that can never make us whole. Maybe we can begin there, today, and simply say "God I'm sorry. I'm sorry for believing that something or someone else can make me whole. I'm sorry for neglecting our relationship. I'm sorry for trusting more in myself and my own power than in you. I'm sorry that I've neglected the amazing potential for fruitfulness that you've placed within the seed of my life. Forgive me. Teach me to trust you, to love you, and to rely on you, to stand with Jesus on the mountain and to rest knowing that I already have it all because you have me."

Maybe our Lenten journey can begin there. With humility, confession and a desire to dwell with God. Not feeling guilt or shame, or sorry for ourselves, but with an earnest desire to take one step in the direction of Jesus who invites us to let go, to trust, and to fall into God's goodness.

In a few moments you're invited to come forward to receive on your foreheads the sign of the cross made with ashes. It is both a sign of our sin and mortality and our utter dependence upon God, *and* because it's in the shape of the cross it's a reminder of our abundant life in Christ. Maybe today it can also remind us of the fertile ground into which God is inviting any of us who want more, to plant the seeds of our lives and to trust God with the harvest. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Chuck DeGroat, *Falling into Goodness*. p. 12-13.