

Embrace the Wilderness

“Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Matthew 4:1

Matthew 4:1-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 9, 2014

If I were to take a poll of the general population of what they have given up for Lent, I suspect that a majority of people would answer that they have given up Lent for Lent. That's too bad, because this season has the potential to be a transformative time in our personal and corporate journey of faith.

The church season of Lent can be a **holy time** – a time set aside for spiritual disciplines such as prayer, self-examination, repentance, and being more intentional about doing acts of love and kindness for others. Lent can be **honest time** – a time to lay bare before God and ourselves what's really going on in our lives. Lent can also be a time to **recommit yourself to the ways of God and to your own best understanding of being who God has created you to be.**

Each and every year we are invited to enter the season of Lent as a pilgrimage that begins with Jesus' own journey into the wilderness. In this biblical story, Matthew tells us that it was immediately after Jesus' baptism that he “was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.” (Matthew 4:1-2). Let's explore, literally and figuratively, the image and metaphor of the wilderness.

When most of us think of the word ‘wilderness,’ we picture the kind of place where many of us go to get away from the busyness of life, a place where we can get some much needed rest and recreation. That's a major reason why I moved north of town to some land in the country. But in the Bible, **the wilderness is nearly always a place of struggle and of being tested.** Think of Moses and the Israelites wandering for 40 years in the desert before entering the promised land. In the Gospel of Matthew, we learn that it is God's Spirit who leads Jesus into the wilderness to face a struggle with the devil. **The wilderness becomes a place where Jesus' (and our) core commitments will be tested.**

It must be noted that the term ‘devil’, and even Satan, have a much different meaning in ancient Scripture than they do for most people today. They would not have pictured Satan as portrayed in countless Hollywood movies, or preached by those trying to literally scare the hell out of people. **In its broader usage, the term ‘devil’ means “one who tests and attacks, misleads, deceives, diverts, discredits, or slanders.” Speaking from the perspective of progressive Christianity, the devil does not mean a personified entity of evil** – like that little person in red with horns and a pitch fork sitting on our shoulder. Rather, **the devil is simply a term for that which attempts to draw us away from the ways of God and from the understanding of our own identity as beloved children of God.** This is what the devil attempts to do in Matthew, to mislead Jesus about the meaning of the purposes of God, and his own identity as the Son of God.

All three of the temptations Jesus faced, which I'm afraid we don't have time to go into detail this morning, are really just a variation on the same basic theme. **The devil tempts victims – whether Jesus or us – to go for power and control.**

In the first confrontation, the 'tester' attempts to mislead Jesus into using his power for himself by turning stones into bread, rather than trusting God to satisfy his need. Yet, Jesus will not misuse his power for personal material gain.

The second test focuses on Jesus' vulnerability and need for safety, were he to jump off the pinnacle of the temple. Yet, Jesus will not misuse his power to make himself safe and secure.

The third temptation attempts to seduce Jesus with domination and prestige, if he were given all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. Yet, Jesus will not misuse his power to amass clout and esteem.

It's interesting that the assigned lectionary scripture passage for the First Sunday in Lent is always this story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. It's clear, then, that **a major focus of the season of Lent is on the self-examination of that which tempts you and me.** From this particular biblical story we are certainly called to reflect upon the temptation to misuse our own power and control. But I also think this is where the concept of the Seven Deadly Sins in the Roman Catholic tradition arouse. **Many are indeed tempted by lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride.**

I found something else this week even more helpful and specific in defining temptation. It comes from biblical commentator Maryetta Anschutz. She writes:

Temptation comes to us in moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough.

Temptation comes in judgments we make about strangers or friends who make choices we do not understand.

Temptation rules us, making us able to look away from those in need and to live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger, and disease.

Temptation rages in moments when we allow our temper to define our lives or when addiction to wealth, power, influence over others, vanity, or an inordinate need for control defines who we are.

Temptation wins when we engage in the justification of little lies, small sins: a racist joke, a questionable business practice for the greater good, a criticism of a spouse or partner when he or she is not around.

Temptation wins when we get so caught up in the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself.

These are the faceless moments of evil that, while mundane, lurk in the recesses of our lives and our souls."

Anschutz concludes with a very helpful understanding of how to approach the season of Lent.

Lenten penitance engages the dark places in our lives that we may come face to face with them, name them, understand them, and seek forgiveness for them.

It is not about guilt. It is about freedom from the control that our fears and insecurities have over us all, about the amendment of life and new beginnings.

When we approach this way each and every one of us is challenged to embrace our own wilderness experience. Like Jesus in the wilderness, we learn that **closeness to God will often involve conflict and struggle that will lay bare your and my deepest passion and loyalty**. Jesus willfully and intentionally confronted evil and temptation. That can be instructive for the wilderness experience you may find yourself engaged in at this time in your life.

So remember, though difficult, the wilderness (as a metaphor) is not necessarily a bad place. In fact, most people, including myself, find that it is in those tough and trying times of life that our faith tends to stretch, strengthen and grow. Also, remember that temptation is not to be avoided at all costs. It is inevitable for us as children of God, just as it was for Jesus.

I encourage you to use this season of Lent as a special opportunity to reflect upon your own wilderness experience, and God's presence with you.

Embrace the wilderness. Embrace Lent.

Amen.

Resource:
Fasting on the Word