

Sunday, February 18, 2024
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11
“Temptations in the Garden, Temptations in the Wilderness”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

A real live devil: Temptation, Seduction, Betrayal, Snakes who talk, Satan who walks: Coming soon to a theater near you? Or welcome to the First Sunday in Lent. In order to even begin to dig into these scripture passages, we must first back up a minute. We are now in the Gospel of Matthew and in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is first baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, the heavens open and God announces, “this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased”. Jesus now knows without a doubt that he is God’s son, and immediately he is thrust into the wilderness by the Spirit of God, where he has to fast for 40 days and 40 nights. That’s where we begin today, on this first Sunday in Lent - in the wilderness.

The wilderness, the desert, is one of the richest metaphors for understanding spiritual life. First of all, the wilderness *is an actual place* – a beautiful but scary one. Many ancient people believed that demons, devils, or evil spirits lived in the desert. That is because the landscape is harsh and home to plants and animals that adapted to this rugged environment. It’s in the wilderness God’s people received the Covenant. It’s in the wilderness God shaped them into God’s covenant people and cared for them. The Wilderness is also *a state of mind and heart*. You see yourself, your life, and God differently, as the stark landscape envelops you with its natural solitude. The wilderness also puts you face to face with what you don’t want to face.

We too know moments when we are dropped suddenly into the wilderness. Standing knee deep in a place of hard decision making, trying to figure out the right thing to do, that place of being utterly alone, that place of great fear and trembling. Even Jesus – the divinely proclaimed Beloved Son of God, was driven into the wilderness and a time of personal struggle, trial and testing. No one escapes these things.

So, you are God’s son, says Satan, okay then let’s put that to the test. This is one of the few times we read the word “Satan” or “Devil” in the Bible (I like the Commentary that calls him “the Diabolic One”). The word Satan or Devil means adversary. It is the power which seeks to take over God’s will and replace it with human desire. It is the power to take away one’s trust in God and question one’s identity. So, is there a Satan, a devil so to speak, a place called hell? I’m not sure Satan is a person or an entity, but I do believe in evil forces, within us and around us, which lead us into darkness, into sin. And I believe that people live in darkness, separated from God and one another, and that temptations or sins can lead us into that deep darkness.

How many of you can name the seven deadly sins? Ready? Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, and Pride. Now how many of you can name the Seven Heavenly Virtues? Ah, these are a bit harder, wonder why? These are Kindness, Temperance, Charity, Chastity, Humility, Diligence and Patience. Sometimes I think the biggest sin may be fear. It is fear that drives us away from people. It is fear that causes us to act in deceitful ways. It is fear that drives us into that darkness, that wilderness, separated and alone.

But notice with each temptation Jesus is faced with, he is never afraid, he is calm, confident. Each temptation perfectly invites Jesus to turn away from his trust in God, each in a different way and yet each one invites Jesus to prove his “sonship” through a display of power. Jesus’ power, God’s power, and Satan’s power.

The first temptation is about food. Makes sense to me. 40 days of fasting? Got bread? Just make some! How many of you are giving up something for Lent? Many of us practice giving up something - chocolate or wine or desserts or fast food - something that make us suffer a little – not like fasting 40 days, but maybe to help us to focus more on the virtues of Kindness and Temperance rather than deadly sins of Gluttony or Sloth. I have a friend who posted she is giving up Brussels Sprouts for Lent – sounds good to me. I have another who is giving up all social media – Facebook, Instagram, snapchat – now that’s a bit more like fasting for some.

The second temptation is about loyalty and really simplistic thinking. You think you are God’s son, the Diabolic One questions, just throw yourself off this Temple, God will catch you. Do the trust fall, let’s put God and God’s power, to the test. But Jesus will not let the Tempter narrow his understanding of God’s word so that it becomes a litmus test for faith. Maybe we too should focus a little more on Humility and Diligence instead of Envy and Pride.

The third temptation is more an out-and-out bribe rather than a temptation, Jesus is promised all the power and glory the earth can offer if he will give his allegiance and devotion to the Tempter. You will have people *worshipping* you Jesus. I think another huge sin we have is for power and influence. Who do we *worship* more than God? Money? Things? Status? Our name in lights, that framed award? Having it all? Maybe we should focus a little less on Greed and a little more Charity and Patience.

Now, why place the story of Adam and Eve with Jesus in the wilderness? Well, both involve a tempter, one who invites them to mistrust God. Remember that most of first part of Genesis are stories. Stories that do not explain how but why – why did God create the earth, humans, and maybe to answer specific questions about certain realities in life – why is there pain in childbirth, why is the ground hard to work, why do snakes crawl upon the earth? Maybe. So Adam and Eve and the snake.

Okay, so the snake, the real, live, cold-bellied serpent in our story symbolizes Satan, the ultimate trickster, something outside of ourselves which points us to separation from God. There is so much we don’t know in this story. The directive to not eat of the tree was given to Adam before Eve is even on the scene, we don’t know what he told her. Clearly, she wasn’t taught – don’t talk to strangers, especially talking snakes! We do know Adam said to her that she shouldn’t touch the tree or she’ll die. But does she even know what death is? Does she know what it means to have her eyes open? Where they closed? Why doesn’t she go and discuss this with Adam first, he’s right next to her? Why not find God and ask God?

She just sees what is pleasing and goes for it. And to set the record straight, it was not an apple, Granny Smith or otherwise. Apples grow in Washington State, not in Mesopotamia. It was probably a fig or maybe a pomegranate. Personally I think it was Godiva chocolate. The apple came about in the European Middle Ages when artists began to depict Eve with an apple, a more common fruit with bright colors.

Anyway, why do you think she ate it? Curiosity, ambition? Maybe she touched it, noticed she wasn’t dead, and ate it. And what about Adam, was he just standing there and she gave him some? And may I say, it took the craftiest creature around to temp the woman. All it took for the woman to temp Adam was a question, posed with her pretty eyes and extended hand? “wanna bite”? Did he think she was going to die and couldn’t bear the thought of life without her? We don’t know.

Notice the serpent doesn't actually lie to Adam and Eve, the serpent calls into question God's trustworthiness by suggesting that there is more to the story than God let on. In this way the serpent sows the seeds of mistrust, inviting Adam and Eve to fulfill the deep want and need that is at the core of being human - not through their relationship with God - but by seizing the fruit that is in front of them. It is the temptation to be self-sufficient, to establish their identity on their own, that seduces the first humans. (1)

Jesus too is faced with identity, if you are the son of God, in other words, how do you know? Wouldn't it be better to know for certain? Turn stone to bread, jump from the Temple, worship me, then you will never doubt. You will *know*. The difference is Jesus knows who he is, whose he is. His identity was never in question in his mind. In each case Jesus rejects the temptation given to him and lodges his identity, future, and fortunes on God's character and trustworthiness. He replies with Scriptural affirmation taken from Old Testament passages referencing the Israelites time in the wilderness. Just as Israel emerged from their wanderings chastened, purified and ready to inherit God's blessings and promises, so also Jesus emerges from his trials confirmed of his identity and purified and strengthened for his awaiting mission. Do we emerge from the wilderness like that or are we a lot more like Adam and Eve, tempted by a bright shiny thing.

To be human is to be aware that we carry inside ourselves a hole, an emptiness that we will always be restless to fill. Adam and Eve beheld the fruit, but after they ate it, the emptiness remained. What is that hole, that temptation today in you, in us? What will fulfill our emptiness? What does Augustine say, we humans are always restless until we rest in God. When we believe we are God's children. But be clear, to be Christian doesn't mean the hole is erased, the search for meaning and purpose, being tempted by society; it is to accept that we are created for relationship with God and with each other. It's not to rid of hardships, wilderness places, deadly sins which tempt us, but to have the courage to stand in them, and not simply surviving the wilderness but actually flourishing in them, knowing God is with us.

As one pastor writes, but let me make one thing clear, it's not that food or possessions or careers or bus-i-ness is bad, it's when they consume us, when we trust only in them, when we fill our lives only with those things, thinking that only they can bring us happiness. Not believing that joy comes from within, with a life in Christ, giving to others, serving others. These things are a problem "only because it twists our values; it also wastes time. Promoting God's kingdom takes a back seat because our time and money go [to those things]. Worrying about people becomes less important because spending hours by the bedside of a terminally ill patient doesn't help our bottom line." (2)

So notice how this section in Matthew begins, Jesus is led – he is led into the wilderness by the Spirit of God - he knew all along God was with Him. God would guide him. God would minister to him. God would be his strength. That is how he could face 40 days of fasting, the temptations to perform miracles, rule the earth, have all power and wisdom and might from earthly things, because God would save. And in the end, in the end of the wilderness, were angels. Angels who waited on him. To be "waited on" means they had an eye on Jesus and were ready all along to provide whatever he needed.

The question for us is what sort of form being "waited on" might take in our lives. Because we too know when we are in the wilderness, that place of hardship, temptation, darkness, pain, fear, it is our faith which will sustain us but we also know the only way to make it out, the only

way to survive, is to open the door and let the angels come in to take care of us. Anyone who has walked this hardship can name the person or persons who were their angels.

On Ash Wednesday, we began our journey through the wilderness with Jesus for these 40 days, until the resurrection on Easter Sunday. And part of our journey is to seriously look at our temptations, those things that possess us, afflict us, corrupt us, and lead us away from God, others, and a holy life.

As one pastor states, "When it's our turn, none of us is going to get the Son of God test. We're going to get the regular old Adam and Eve test, which means that the devil won't need much more than an all-you-can-eat buffet and a tax refund to turn our heads. Wildernesses come in so many shapes and sizes that the only way you can really tell you are in one is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life and come up empty. No food. No earthly power. No special protection – just a Bible-quoting devil and a whole bunch of sand."
(3)

So maybe this Lenten Season it's not about what you will give up, our fasting so to speak, but what we will add. More God, more Bible, more Jesus. You will see over the next few weeks that each story each Sunday, has to do with moving closer and closer to Jesus. Like in the song "Day by Day" from the musical Godspell, "To see thee more clearly, to love thee more dearly, to follow thee more nearly"; that is our Lenten prayer. Amen.

(1) Lose, The Rev. David. Commentary on Genesis.

(2) Taylor, the Rev. Barbara Brown. The Wilderness Exam. 2/21/2010

(3) Ibid.