

“Into the Wilderness”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday of Lent
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First Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

⁴Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 4:1-13

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” ⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” ⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ ¹¹and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” ¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.



Sermon: *“Into the Wilderness”*

The story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness is a story to which we can relate. We all know what it is to be tempted. A temptation is something that tests our resolve and threatens to pull us away from our intended course of action. Your brain may say “eat sensibly,” but your stomach says “eat it all!”. That’s the way we tend to see temptation. And sometimes it’s cute - like the temptation to eat Girl Scout Cookies by the box-full, and sometimes it’s not so cute. The call of opioids or alcohol or gambling to the addict is life threatening.

We can learn many things from this story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, but first among them is that Jesus suffered temptation. Yes, in addition to being fully God, Jesus was also fully human. Human beings suffer temptation and Jesus was no different. The author of Hebrews writes that Jesus “in every respect has been tested as we are, yet [was] without sin.”¹

As we stand in this season of Lent where we examine sin and sinfulness - both our own and that of our community - it is helpful to remember that Jesus faced temptation just as we do. That we can rely on him to help us resist those temptations, and that when we fail, Jesus understands because he has been right where we are. And if that is the only lesson we learn today that is good enough; but, there is more to be mined from this story. For instance, why do you think Luke includes it in his gospel and why does he include it here?

Just before this story, at the end of chapter three, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River and we are told that a voice comes from heaven saying to Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”² Then we get a genealogy which traces Jesus’ ancestry not just back to Abraham, but all the way back to Adam.³

That genealogy starts by noting that Jesus was the “Son of Joseph, who was son of Matthat, who was son of Levi...,” and so on, all the way back, past Abraham, to the very first humans in Genesis: “...son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.

So, the last words of chapter three define Jesus as “Son of God.” Then we begin chapter four which tells of Jesus being tested in the wilderness by Satan who challenges him saying, “If you are the son of God...” prove it. Luke shapes his story so that in these temptations from Satan, we see who Jesus is and what it means for him to be called “Son of God,” and it’s not what we would expect of the son of a great king.

Satan challenges him saying *If you are the son of God, turn these stones into bread.* Satan is almost taunting Jesus: “Use your power, if you really have it, to feed yourself. You’ve been out here 40 days, surely you must be hungry.” Jesus was

probably tempted to do this kind of thing his whole adult life. During his itinerant teaching and preaching, he probably slept on a lot of hard ground instead of soft beds, and he probably ate a lot of meals scrapped together from what was left over and what was donated by strangers, when he could have been eating hot, sumptuous meals. The temptation to make his life more comfortable had to have been powerful.

Then it is as if Satan understands that Jesus has chosen a simpler path. So, he offers a more prestigious one. Satan offers Jesus the authority to rule all the nations of the earth, all he must do is worship Satan. Yet Jesus was familiar with the teachings of his own tradition. He knew the words of Deuteronomy 6: "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone*". And he was unwilling to worship anyone but God.

But here is the really interesting thing about this: people usually see the temptation here as being the chance to rule the world. But that was eventually going to happen for Jesus anyway. In Philippians, Paul writes that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.⁴ What Satan is really offering Jesus is not *more* power, but *a short cut to get to that power*; a path with no suffering, or struggle; a shortened journey that will not lead to a cross.

But Jesus rejects Satan's offer to take the easy way because that is not the path to which he has been called; that is not the purpose for which he has been created.

Finally, Satan challenges him again, saying "*If you are the son of God,*" throw yourself down from this high place and let God save you from death. Jesus faced a lot of hardship and on his road to Jerusalem, he walked knowing what awaited him there. In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night that he was later arrested, we are told that Jesus prayed that God would let this cup pass from his hands, "*yet not my will, but yours.*" The temptation to escape his destiny must have been great.

Satan challenges him to throw himself off a high place to prove the Son of God cannot be destroyed. But if Jesus really wants to emerge from this life unscathed, he doesn't need immaculate intercession from God. Jesus needs only keep his mouth shut and studiously avoid going anywhere near Jerusalem. If he just stops talking and refuses God's call, he will live a nice, long, safe life.

In this story of temptation, we find out who Jesus is. Jesus is willing to face the suffering and sacrifice that he knows must come. Jesus is willing to be without. He is willing to wait. He is willing to suffer.

Being called "Son of God" means being the servant of God. There will be no worshipping or obedience to Satan or anyone else. For Jesus, we see that the Shema, the core of Jewish faith, "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*"⁵ are not just words to remember, they are the words that define him.

Why does Luke tell this story? Because here in the very beginning of the gospel story, Luke is helping us to see exactly who Jesus is and what his life will be about. But why does Jesus tell it?

This story of Jesus in the wilderness has generated a lot of debate and discussion over the centuries about where it came from. The story itself includes only Jesus and Satan and no one else to bear witness to the events it describes. Nowhere in the bible do we find an account of Jesus teaching this story or telling it in public. So how does Luke come to know it?

I choose to believe that this was a story that Jesus shared with the disciples in one of those close, personal moments when it was just the 13 of them together; after the crowds had gone home and the business of being disciples was done for the night. I imagine the group of them sitting around the fire some evening, the dishes have been washed and put away. They're enjoying the quiet of a summer evening after the hard work of the day.

In those quiet moments, they would have shared stories of the people they met and the amazing things they had seen and heard. They might even have passed a skin of wine around the circle.

And then in one of those oddly quiet moments that just sort of happen when a group of people are talking over each other - when the several different conversations going on at once just sort of, stop ... nothing intentional no one silences them, they just all fade of their own accord. And in that moment, framed by the sound of crickets chirping and the soft crackle of the fire, Jesus looked up at them and began to tell them this story ... of something amazing that happened before he had met them; of his time in the wilderness when he encountered the adversary of God, "*You know, I met Satan once...*".

It makes sense to me that this story must come from Jesus himself. But why would he share it, do you think? What purpose would he have in telling them of this supernatural encounter, beyond just the fact that it was a show stopper of a story? And the answer is that while this story says something about who Jesus is, it also teaches us something about who we are,

and who we are called to be. It tells the disciples something about the temptations they will face and what it will mean to be *a disciple* in the face of temptation to be *something else*.

Fred Craddock writes that a real temptation is an offer not to fall but to rise. The serpent in the Garden of Eden did not ask Adam and Eve, “Do you wish to be like the devil?” but rather “Do you wish to be like God?”⁶ For the disciples, the chance to turn away from God in dramatic ways won’t be very enticing (Judas being the lone exception, but that comes much later). If they’ve followed Jesus this far and learned from him this long, then they are pretty committed. For the most part, petty temptations to do morally questionable things are not going to be a problem for these disciples. But the temptation to be something else, to save themselves, to benefit themselves, to do things that might seem morally ambiguous or even objectively positive, yet counter to God’s plan will be strong.

You see, we think temptation is different for us than it was for Jesus in this story. We aren’t alone in the wilderness. We don’t face the personification of God’s adversary. While we can relate to the idea of facing temptation, the circumstances described here are far from our ordinary experience.

So, if we come away from this with only the lesson that Jesus resisted temptation because of love and devotion to God, therefore so can we - then we have certainly come away with something of value. But if we go deeper, we can see that the temptations of Jesus are the very heart of our temptations as well.

What? You might be asking yourself (and you would be right to): When have I been tempted to make magic bread or take a flying leap to prove God will catch me? Hopefully that answer is “never.” *New Testament* scholar Alan Culpepper says that this story describes what he calls “the perennial ethical challenges that Christians face.”⁷ The temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness are temptations you and I face all the time:

The temptations to forget our baptismal identity,
 The temptation to attempt to use our religion for personal gain,
 The temptation to put our best efforts toward being successful rather than faithful,
 The temptation to be dazzled by the riches of the world,
 The temptation to make compromises where we are called to stand firm,
 The temptation to avoid the path of sacrifice and suffering.”⁸

In telling this story, Jesus offers a road map for his disciples and for us to follow. When he was faced with challenges and temptations to be something other than who he was created and called to be, he relied on the power and presence of God’s Holy Spirit, to guide him, to strengthen him, to give him reassurance that God’s way was really the best way.

For us as for Jesus, this might mean being willing to do without, to wait, and to sacrifice and suffer.

In this season of Lent, we are invited to consider our own lives and the ways in which we have given-in to the temptations of this world. We’ll certainly think in terms of vices and bad habits - it’s just easier that way. But, what really matters are the times we are tempted to turn away from the path God has set for us; to embrace an alternate identity or to forget what it means to be called a Child of God.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Hebrews 4:15, NRSV

² Luke 3:21-22, NRSV

³ Luke 3:23-38, NRSV

⁴ Philippians 2:10-11, NRSV

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:4-5, NRSV

⁶ Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990. 56. Print. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.

⁷ Culpepper, R. Alan *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Volume IX: The Gospel of Luke and The Gospel of John*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998. 101. Print.

⁸ Culpepper, R. Alan, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, pg. 101