

March 12, 2017

“Temptations”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 4:1-13

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The wilderness – it's definitely a place of solitude. And I think Lent might be a good time for all of us to take a trip to the wilderness and experience some solitude. To get in touch with our inner selves. To listen to what God might be saying to us. For don't we admire those people who purposefully do seek solitude. As New Englanders, we might think of the classic example of Henry David Thoreau and his years living in solitude at Walden Pond and on Cape Cod. He said, "I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach me." As a result, he offered us his lofty ideas and reflections about nature, spirituality, justice, and much more. Mother Teresa is another one who loved solitude. She felt her relationship with God was at its best when she was alone with God in prayer. A journalist once asked her, "What do you say to God when you pray?" She replied she didn't say anything at all, but just listened. The journalist then asked her, "Well, what does God say?" To which she replied, "Nothing, he listens as well."

For most of us, however, other than occasional walks on the beach or through the woods, where our primary purpose is to get exercise or enjoy a beautiful day, we don't do solitude well. It's very infrequent that we stop to pay a call on ourselves in this manner. And then, even if we do, we rarely find anyone at home. Yes, very few people have the courage or the discipline to meet solitude head-on. Because, if you take the journey seriously, deliberately, being alone in solitude for a period of time gives you the opportunity to really have it out with yourself. You're at your most vulnerable. And there's no one to impress. So it's a place where you might decide how much money and how many things in this life you... don't need. It's a place where you can confront the issues and situations in your life, both past and present, and realize that everything was, and is, dependent... on the choices you decide to make. And, it's also a place where you can make life changing decisions... and gain the faith and courage to face the future. So given these facts, is it any surprise that our Lord Jesus Christ seeks out solitude by going into the wilderness for forty days to fast, to pray, to listen, so that he can prepare himself for his ministry in the world.

No, it's no surprise at all except for one thing. And that is we can't look at Jesus' undertaking in the wilderness in any ordinary sense. He's not any ordinary human being trying to find his inner self. He's the Son of God, whose mission is to literally “save the world.” And because this is an event of such enormity, doesn't it make sense that there's another force looking for the destruction of the world that

would come along to oppose him. I think it does. Because, the fact is, what happens to Jesus in the wilderness will have the most profound impact on humanity there has ever been. Our eternal salvation is the direct result of what transpired in that Judean desert. Because as we will see, Jesus could very easily have succumbed to the temptations placed before him. Temptations that are like the ones you and I face every day.

So what happens in the wilderness? Well, along comes the devil to challenge and test Jesus. Now my guess is that most of us here hardly ever give much thought to the devil and his ways. We're obviously far too sophisticated to believe that such a cute, little fellow in an adorable red outfit, with little horns and a pitchfork, could possibly pose a problem. Who gives any thought to the devil, anyway! We're like the old Arab sleeping in his tent in the desert. He wakes up hungry and lights his lamp, and finds his bowl of dried figs. When he picks up the first fig he sees a worm in it, so in disgust, he throws it away. Then he picks out a second fig, and finds there's another worm in that one, so he throws it away as well. At that point, the old man decides to turn out his lamp. And then he proceeds to eat the whole bowl of figs. You see, some things are easier, less disturbing, when you don't think about them.

But perhaps we're living in the dark just as the old Arab. We'd rather not think about the devil, Satan. Perhaps because he already has part of us, convincing us he's not a threat, that we've got nothing to worry about. But the fact is Satan isn't stupid. He's evil, and he's dangerous, but he's not stupid. The Apostle John calls Satan the "father of lies," for he fights deceptively to turn us away from God, and make us slaves to sin. So let's look at today's scripture to see how Satan tempts Jesus, and how he uses those very same temptations to destroy our faith and trust in God. And, to see how we can resist.

First, Satan tempts Jesus with our desire for the "things" of this world by tempting Jesus with our most basic need. Food. Luke said that for forty days, Jesus "ate nothing at all and was famished." So here he was weak and vulnerable, and the devil says, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Now we obviously need food to live, but the devil here, is really making a broader statement about all the "things" we think we need. And isn't this the easiest way the devil turns us away from God? By telling us it's alright to put our all personal needs and desires first, even before God. Putting our conveniences, our work schedules, play schedules, kid's schedules, and even our relationships before our spiritual life. I remember a time this temptation really hit home for me – the weekend of our daughter Lisa's wedding. It was a Saturday afternoon wedding, but it was right here on Cape Cod. We had a house full of guests and everybody was looking forward to the wedding, the

reception and the after party. And during the planning for this event, guess who was there with me. Satan. And he told me, “You really should just take the next day, Sunday, off from church. That makes sense doesn’t it, with all that will be going on. After all, this is a once-in-a-lifetime event, Lisa’s special day, with celebration, good food, drinking, dancing, fun. Plus you paid for it all. Everyone will understand.” That’s what Satan told me. But what did Jesus say? Well we heard it today, “It is written, one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Yes, the food, the drink, the celebration, would all be very good, but, I remembered God’s word, “Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be given to you.” In my life, I have always tried first and foremost to seek and do the will of God, before anything else. And when I think of all that my family and I have been given in return, I can only thank God, because he has truly given our family blessings in abundance. Abundance, poured out in good measure. All of our needs for “things” have more than been met. So no, I did not succumb to that temptation. I wanted to lead worship in church the next day... especially, especially, on that Sunday.

Now the second temptation Satan taunts us with has to do with our choices in who and what we worship. The false gods of this world, or the one, true God. Sound familiar? You see, Satan appeals to our ego and prideful nature by tempting us to worship those false god's of wealth, praise, power, control, prestige. That's why we worship celebrities so much. But then when we don't “have it all” we feel less about ourselves. Author and theologian C.S. Lewis says that pride is the greatest sin. And just imagine for a moment. Here’s Jesus, knowing his journey will lead to the cross. And for what? For a fallen and ungrateful humankind. So Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and all the glory of them, and promises that these will belong to Jesus, without having to go to the cross, if he would only bow down and worship Satan. Glory, power, prestige, a tantalizing thought, isn’t it? Especially in a culture that reveres these gods. But we know deep down, that these gods are shallow and even false. I'll give you an illustration. St. Amatus was a Catholic monk who lived in the seventh century. He became famous for converting a very wealthy ruler named Romeric to Christianity. Now because of Romeric's status, he was a prideful man. And during dinner at Romeric’s home, he asked St. Amatus what he needed to do in order to secure his eternal salvation. Hoping, perhaps, to engage the monk in some lively, theological conversation. Instead, Amatus simply pointed to the priceless silver dishes, plates and candelabras on Romeric’s table, those representing his wealth and power. Amatus said, “Think how many owners, or rather, shall I say, how many slaves, have either already possessed this silver or will possess it in the future. Whether you like it or not, Romeric, you are its slave for you possess it only to

take care of it until the day you die when another will have it. And on that day you will have to render an account as to who and how you have served during your lifetime." Jesus Christ told his followers, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, but forfeit their soul." Do you see now what made him say that? So we need to make the right choice, and answer those temptations that appeal to our prideful nature just as Jesus answered the devil. "It is written, worship the Lord your God and serve only Him."

And finally, the devil tempts us by making us question our faith and trust in God's love for us. He tries to plant the seed of doubt that make us question God's will and plan for our lives. That's why he takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and tells him to test God. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here and God will command his angels to protect you. God will not let your foot be dashed against a stone." And aren't we tempted to test God by questioning God's intention and purpose in our lives when hurt, pain, suffering, and death enter in? When the troubles of this world fall upon us, don't we want to test God, saying, why? If you really cared, you wouldn't let this happen. You would protect me and not let my "foot be dashed against a stone." But we cannot test God this way. Jesus didn't need to prove to the devil that God loved him. He had the faith that God would be with him and would love and care for him, no matter what. Just like he does for us. And because Jesus trusted God in this way, he then had the courage to face whatever would come. Even the cross. And so we too must resist the temptation to question God. We must learn from Jesus, who was able to say, "Thy will be done," and answered that temptation of Satan by saying, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

You see, today's scripture shows us we don't have to be afraid of the wilderness, of solitude, of facing ourselves or God. And so let us go out, praying the prayer I believe Jesus prayed in the wilderness. The one he taught us, "Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil. For thine, O God, is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."