

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Luke 4:1-13

First Sunday of Lent
Midway Presbyterian Church
March 6, 2022

Into the Wilderness

Introduction to the Psalm

Verses from our Psalm for this First Sunday of Lent are quoted by the devil in our Gospel Lesson from Luke 4, reminding us of the truth that scripture can be misinterpreted and misused. Listen to these words from Psalm 91:1-2 and 9-16...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Immediately following his baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There he was tempted by the devil in three ways. Listen to Luke's account of the Temptation of Jesus in chapter 4, verses 1-13...

Sermon

Barbara Chaapel, a retired Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia Presbytery, tells the story of what happened many years ago when she was asked to facilitate a congregation's fundraising effort. The church had a tradition of distinguished preaching and wonderful music and a storied history as an almost 300-year-old Presbyterian congregation, but they faced complex challenges: an urban context with its homelessness, violence, and poverty; declining and older membership, their young families moving out of the city because of poor schools; changing neighborhood demographics. She recalls one of the members of the committee seeking to address their problems, saying at an early meeting: "It's like living in a wilderness." And that gave them the theme of their long-range plan: Journeying through the Wilderness.

The Gospel Lesson for this first Sunday in Lent finds Jesus in the wilderness, as he begins a journey that will end on a Jerusalem hill called Golgotha. We tend to equate the three

temptations by the devil to disobeying one of the Ten Commandments, or to personal temptations in our lives, like diet, use of time, materialism, overwork. Yet for Jesus, the three temptations that he faced here in the wilderness were really temptations about how he would carry out his vocation, how he would live out his identity, how he would understand and use his power.

To set the context of our Gospel Lesson, God's approval has just been placed upon Jesus at his baptism. In chapter 3 Luke says,

...when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (21b-22)

So his baptism established the identity and authority of Jesus. The question is: what kind of Son will he be—a faithful Son, or a seeker of power and glory?

The story of The Temptation in the Wilderness then shows Jesus being tempted to discount the way of service, suffering, and cross. The wilderness which he entered was not a vast expanse of sand with an occasional cactus or tumbleweed. Rather it was a rocky, daunting place of cliffs and caves. It was a place people avoided, believing that demons and evil spirits occupied the place, knowing that predators and thieves lurked there.

Notice the approach of this temptation:

"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Make Jesus question if he really is who God says he is. Cause him to wonder if the intimations he received on the hills of Nazareth were false, and the Voice at his baptism only a trick of the imagination, like a mirage in the desert.

Yes, there was a need for food among the poor of his own people. And the temptation here is for Jesus to adopt the view that man can live by bread alone. To bribe people into following him through material gifts, like many politicians do. You know, “a chicken in every pot.”

The devil’s challenge to Jesus is not to do a bad thing. Who could argue with assuaging one’s hunger, or feeding hungry people? But Jesus knows that daily bread, while vital and to be prayed for, is not sufficient to define his mission. For man does not live by bread alone.

In the second temptation, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and then says to him,

“To you I will give all this authority and their glory...
if you will worship me.”

Here the appeal was to be a political leader who would free Israel from the grip of Rome and restore to her the kingdom as with David, and to rule the world with justice. Surely being free of the heavy-handed control of Rome would be a blessing. So the temptation is to delude oneself into believing that a little deal with the devil will only bring good. The temptation here is to commit idolatry. To worship someone or something other than God.

But Jesus had disciplined himself to pray and meditate upon scripture and again he responds to this temptation with a quote from Deuteronomy (6:13; 10:20):

“It is written,
‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

The third temptation is to give a convincing sign—to tempt, to test God. Again there is the subtle insinuation of a doubt:

“If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself
down from off the temple.”

Maybe the Messiah was expected to appear in this way. The 91st Psalm, from which the devil quotes, was given a Messianic interpretation at that time and it says:

“He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”

Here the devil wrongly cites scripture to strengthen his proposition.

This temptation has both a personal and a social impact. As for its personal force, if Jesus should cast himself headlong from the pinnacle of the temple, he could prove both his own trust *and* God’s power. As for its social force, he might startle a shallow generation out of its indifference into sudden belief. Sometimes people are tempted to use the sensational for the sake of God. Jesus felt the temptation to court instant death for the cause of the kingdom. Could he imagine the crowd watching: “Surely he is not going to jump! Look, he has jumped! He is safe! He must be the Messiah!”

But Jesus’ answer to this temptation came through the ancient truth, newly given, that man has no right to try to force God’s hand. “No,” said Jesus, and again he quotes Deuteronomy:

“It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”” (6:16)

Jesus saw that the way of the sensationalist is not lasting. He would not choose that way. He would live his life and fulfill his ministry waiting upon and trusting in God.

So, what truths can we draw from Luke’s story of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness?

First, Jesus was truly tempted. It is important for us to understand that Jesus did in fact struggle with temptation, not just during this time in the wilderness, but at other points in his ministry, most noticeably in the events of the Passion. Remember his prayer about not having to drink the cup of crucifixion: “Yet not my will but thine.” (Mt. 26:39)

Some Christians have found the notion of Jesus being subject to temptations provocative and uncomfortable. But the writer of the Hebrews was not one of them. As he declares:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (4:15)

Furthermore, the onslaught of temptation may be strongest just after the exhilaration of a moment of revelation. Right after his baptism and the affirmation that Jesus is God's Son, the Beloved, he was led into the wilderness. We too should not be surprised if we are in a battle with temptation right after some mountaintop experience.

Commentator Joseph Fitz Myer says that the scenes in Luke's story of The Temptation in the Wilderness symbolize the seduction in the hostility, opposition, and rejection which confronted him throughout his ministry. For example, in Matthew 16:1 we read:

The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

In whatever images or concepts the power of evil may be presented, it is the testimony of experience as well as Scripture that there is in the world real opposition to love, faith, hope, truth, and goodness. If there are any doubts, just look at what is going on in Ukraine today.

Furthermore, temptation does not go away because we have been to Sunday School and Worship on Sunday. Those called of God and committed to the way of God in the world are not immune to the struggle with evil, or the struggle of being faithful disciples. As we sang in our opening hymn,

For still our ancient foe
doth seek to work us woe.
(*"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"*)

Then, we should not fail to note Luke's accent on the Holy Spirit. Jesus was born of the Spirit; he received the Spirit at Baptism; he was led by the Spirit in the wilderness; and following his temptations, Jesus went into Galilee to minister in the power of the Spirit. The good news is that this same Spirit is God's gift to us. Resisting and overcoming evil are not left simply to our

will power or psychic strategies. The effective presence of God the Holy Spirit is offered and available.

I need Thee every hour,
Stay Thou nearby;
Temptations lose their power,
When Thou art nigh.
(“I Need Thee Every Hour,” v. 2)

And finally, we see Jesus victorious in the time of testing by joining to the presence of the Spirit the appropriate use of Scripture. It is important for Luke and for the church that the story of Jesus, from birth, through death, resurrection, and ascension, to the proclamation of the gospel to all the nations, is “according to the Scriptures.”

My friends, on this First Sunday of Lent we recognize the reality of evil and the deceitful power of temptation. We confess that there have been times when we have succumbed to that power. But we also claim the promise that we are not left solely to such defenses as we can muster ourselves, but rather that God is with us and for us, through Word and Spirit, to enable us to fight the good fight, to run our race, and to be more than conquerors through him who loved us.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we bend our knees and lift up our hearts, giving glory to God forever. Amen. (Phil. 2:9-11)