

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
2/10/08

Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSV)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. [2] He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. [3] The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." [4] But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

[5] Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, [6] saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'

and 'On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "

[7] Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

[8] Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; [9] and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." [10] Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.' "

[11] Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

TEMPTATION IN THE WILDERNESS

Temptation takes place in the wilderness. The story of the temptation of Jesus is found in all three of the synoptic gospels, and that point is made in each story. The wilderness is the place of temptation.

Temptation occurs when we are vulnerable, when we are weak emotionally or physically. Temptation occurs when we think no one is looking. Temptation occurs in that lonely place in our heart. Temptation occurs when the wolf is knocking at the door.

Quite often we are dismayed at what people of faith are tempted to do in the wilderness. Trusted officers misappropriate church funds. Ministers betray

a sacred trust. Certainly it is never right to succumb to temptation. But, when we look at the particular circumstances in these cases we can sometimes understand why people were tempted. They were in the wilderness of despair or loneliness or financial ruin.

Don't speak too boldly about what you would or wouldn't do until you have spent forty days in the wilderness. Don't be too cocky about your own righteousness until you have been tested.

In the wilderness we find out what we really believe. In the wilderness we find out what we really believe about God. In the wilderness we find out if we really trust in the promises and call of God.

LED INTO THE WILDERNESS

The baptism of Jesus must have been a high point for him. As it happened on the Mount of Transfiguration, the voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." The Spirit came down upon him like a dove. The heavens rolled back like a scroll. (Matthew 3:16-17)

We might never have a vision that powerful. But, I do believe that as disciples of Jesus Christ we have a similar promise. If Jesus is God's son, then we are His adopted sons and daughters. We are children of the heavenly king. In life and in death we belong to God.

Those are very powerful affirmations. Sometimes we can almost catch a glimpse of heavenly glory.

But, as it happened with Jesus, it often happens with us. Those moments of affirmation are followed by a long trip into the wilderness.

We sometimes attribute those personal wilderness experiences to bad luck, but in our lesson for today, we learn that Jesus' trip into the wilderness was a result of the Spirit's leading. The same Spirit that was a part of the heavenly vision is also the Spirit that leads Jesus into the wilderness.

We think of the wilderness as a place to be avoided. The wilderness is that place devoid of what we need. In the wilderness there is no food. In the wilderness there is no one to comfort us.

DAILY BREAD IN THE WILDERNESS

But, in the Bible the wilderness is viewed as a kind of mixed blessing. Though the wilderness was the place where the children of Israel were punished for their lack of faith, the wilderness was also the place where God fed them and gave them what they needed on a daily basis.

They learned literally what it meant to say “give us this day our daily bread.” Only manna from heaven and the intervention of God kept them from being utterly consumed by the wilderness.

In later years people would look back on the time in the wilderness as a kind of idyllic time when the presence of God was more real. It was a time when God’s people were willing to trust His leading.

IDOLATRY IN THE WILDERNESS

Of course that would be viewing history through rose colored glasses.

The wilderness was also that place where God’s people worshipped the golden calf. The wilderness was that place where the people spoke against the God who had redeemed them and God’s servant, Moses. The wilderness was that place when people longed for the good old days in Egypt. They might have been Pharaoh’s slaves, but at least they knew where their next meal was coming from.

I think that we should not idealize the wilderness. There is more to the wilderness than pretty sunsets and furry woodland creatures. The wilderness is a dangerous place, even for the most avid outdoorsman.

And the trials we face in life are dangerous as well. Every struggle can be either an opportunity to affirm and deepen our faith or an opportunity to succumb to temptation. In the wilderness there is an urgent need to remember who we are and what we are called to do.

SATAN AND POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY

One of our candidates for the presidency, Mike Huckabee said that he didn’t have to get up in the morning and read a memo in order to know what he

believed. There were certain principles and ideas from which he would not deviate.

I have no judgment about Mike on this, but when a politician makes a statement like that many of us get suspicious. We have heard so many politicians say one thing and then do something else that we have become very jaded.

Quite often they tell us what they think we want to hear instead of telling us the hard truth that we need to hear. Winning elections seem to be more important than telling the truth. But, let's not be too hard on the politicians.

We're equally to blame. Quite often we're the ones who vote according to our prejudices and our fears. Politicians are just a reflection of our own sinfulness.

This sweet, unreliable voice of positive thinking and victory without sacrifice is not the voice of Jesus. According to our passage for today, it is the voice of Satan, the father of all lies.

THE TEMPTATION OF BREAD

In the wilderness what is the first temptation? It is the temptation of bread.

According to the Scripture, Jesus had fasted for forty days. I'm sure he was hungry in a way that we cannot imagine. And I'm equally sure that every person here this morning is also hungry in a big way. Every person here has an appetite that cannot be satisfied even by the blue plate special.

You might not have a hunger for bread, but you might have a hunger for "dough." Money might not make the world go around, but it's always better to have too much than too little. And how much money is enough? Just a little bit more!

Some of us are hungry for affection. Some of us are hungry for companionship. Some of us are hungry for good health.

Where is your hunger? Watch out, your hunger can lead you into temptation. Your hunger can cause you to forsake the call of God for the

call of Wall Street or the call of some faith healer who promises salvation at a bargain rate.

That was the first temptation for Jesus, the temptation that comes with hunger. “If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.”

IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD

Notice how the tempter phrases this first temptation ... “if you are the Son of God.” The devil’s ploy is to make Jesus doubt his vocation, his calling in life.

If you’re the Son of God then why haven’t you been more successful? Why don’t you have bread? Prove your success by turning these stones into bread. Use your divine power to help satisfy your hunger.

Quite often we use religion as a divine pretext for satisfying our own hunger. If the devil can focus our hearts and minds on the hungers in our life, then we don’t have time to focus on anything else.

Don’t get me wrong. Hunger is real. As one preacher put it, “Man does not live by bread alone, but he doesn’t live very long without it either.”

But, our vocation, our calling from God is greater than our hunger. We need something more than just bread or dough or whatever we might have a hunger for. Some people work hard all their lives in order to put bread on the table, but they never seem to find time for God. God never becomes a priority, and their real need in life is never filled.

GOD’S WORD IS THE ANSWER

Jesus dismissed this first temptation, this economic temptation in the same way that he dismisses all three temptations. Jesus answered the Father of all lies with the truth of God’s word. We do not live by “bread alone” but by “every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

The ultimate reality in life is not bread or money or anything in all creation. Everything around us is very fleeting. The ultimate reality in life is the word of God.

According to the Bible it was the word of God that created the entire universe. All of creation is a reflection of God's word.

In the book of Genesis, God says, "Let there be light." And there is light. All of creation comes from the simple phrase, God says ... and there is ... When God speaks, there is a new creation. The word of God is active and alive. It is the source of all life.

The essence of hope is found in the seeds of creation. Life, death and life after life are in the hands of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

We cannot confuse creation with the creator. We cannot worship the world that God has made. We cannot worship what we eat and drink because life is more than food and drink. We cannot worship the people we love or the games we play.

We must worship the one whose word stands behind this awesome creation that surrounds us, the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

When our hunger threatens to overwhelm us, it is this hope that sustains us. In the wilderness of hunger, we remember God's word. It is a word of eternal promise and favor. You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son. I am pleased with you. I will provide you with what you need. Trust me and not your own ability to produce bread.

SPIRITUAL TEMPTATION

The first temptation was the temptation of economic power. The second temptation was the temptation of spiritual power. The devil too Jesus to the center of all religion, the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple.

And then the devil gave Jesus what I like to call the Evil Kenival temptation. For those of you who don't remember, Evil Kenival was the original motorcycle daredevil who died recently of something we never thought he would die of ... old age.

Anyway, Satan tempts Jesus to throw himself off of the temple. Again, he questions Jesus' vocation, his calling. The devil says, "If you are the son of God, throw yourself down."

And here's the interesting part. The devil quotes Scripture! Just as some of us have always suspected, the devil is a theologian. According to the devil the Bible says,

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

Actually, the tempter is not quoting any specific passage but is conflating various Scripture passages to make them say what he wants them to say. This is a favorite technique with many who want to use God's word as an excuse to build themselves up.

There are many who seek notoriety in the holy city by entertaining the crowd. In our day and time many have succumbed to the temptation to turn worship into entertainment and faith into a set of hollow promises.

OBEDIANCE INSTEAD OF SUCCESS

A lot of people truly think that if God is on your side, then nothing bad is going to happen to you. Well, if that's true, then how do you explain the cross? If that's true, then how do you explain Jesus telling his disciples to take up their cross and follow him.

Do you remember when Jesus told the disciples that they must take up a cross and follow him? They didn't like that message one little bit. In fact Peter took Jesus aside and jumped all over him. "Jesus, you've got to be more positive."

And do you remember what Jesus told Peter? Get behind me, Satan. It is Satanic; it is a lie to suggest that God is about nothing more than making our life easy. It is a lie to suggest that we will never be bruised by the stones of life.

I wish it were true. I wish I could tell you that we could cajole God into making our life easy as a way of proving to us that He loves us. But, it just doesn't work that way. Jesus was a better theologian than the devil. And to the devil's facile misuse of Scripture, Jesus has another word. "It is written; do not put the Lord, your God to the test."

As a pastor I see many people who have been bruised by the stones of life, and they take this to mean that God does not love them. They were thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and all it got them was a concussion. They say something like, “I don’t believe in God any more pastor because this tragedy has occurred in my life.”

And to that I often say, “I don’t believe in that God either.” The grace of God is not measured by our health or the size of our 401 K. The grace of God is not measured by our desires and our personal fortune. The grace of God is bigger than that.

God is not the one being tested by this wilderness experience. We are the ones being tested. Can we believe in light when the darkness comes? Can we believe in healing when we fall? Can we believe in hope when we dive into the abyss?

There will come a time when Jesus will dive into the abyss. But, it will not be in response to the temptation of the devil to take a dive. It won’t be an effort to gain popularity with the people.

It will be as a result of God’s difficult call. With blood, sweat and tears Jesus will become the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. It will be a solitary journey in the wilderness. No one will walk with him as he engages in this epic struggle with evil.

Jesus will not succumb to spiritual temptations. He is not running to be Jerusalem’s most popular prophet. He is God’s obedient Son.

His duty to the Father will require great sacrifice and trust. Are we not called to walk in the same path?

POLITICAL TEMPTATION

Finally, the devil takes Jesus up a very high mountain. On the mountaintop Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in all their glory. You might notice that this is kind of last week’s lesson in reverse. Instead of Jesus leading his disciples up the mount of transfiguration, the devil leads Jesus to the place of political power.

The devil tempts Jesus to become a politician!

Have you noticed the disguises of the tempter? He comes disguised as a businessman, a theologian and a politician. In other words, he comes disguised in the form of respectability, and he offers the temptation of economic, spiritual and now political power.

The devil tells our Lord,

“Does God want you to bring in the kingdom Jesus? No problem. But, you’ve got to do it my way. In order to gain power you’ve got to pander to those who would vote for you and compromise your most basic principles.

It’s not about right and wrong. It’s just politics. It’s just the way the world works. It’s just bowing down and worshipping the devil for the greater good!”

This seems like an obvious temptation, but it is in fact the most subtle temptation of all ... the temptation to say that the end justifies the means. It is all right if we bend the definition of right and wrong in the cause of freedom or justice or national security or some other high minded ideal.

We may indeed be able to attain the kingdoms of the world with those techniques. But, what good are the world’s kingdoms if we lose our own soul?

WHO DO WE WORSHIP?

In the end Jesus did not conquer the world by means of an army or supernatural force. Jesus conquered the world with sacrificial love. Jesus laid down his life for the sake of the world. He recognized the voice of Satan whenever it came into his life, and at every turn Jesus told Satan to get lost.

He banishes Satan for a time once more with the words of Scripture. He said, “Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.”

I guess that’s a good way to summarize the whole temptation story. It asks the question, “What or whom do we serve and worship? Do you worship and serve our hungers? Do you worship and serve self? Do we worship power and privilege?”

Or do we worship God and serve only Him? The question can only be answered in the crucible of the wilderness when we have nothing to rely upon but God.

God give us courage and hope as His Spirit leads us through the wilderness. God help us walk this lonely road faithfully with the sure and certain hope that the struggle in the wilderness will eventually lead us home.

Amen.