



WILDERNESS LESSONS
Luke 4:1-13

As we open our gospel lesson today for the first Sunday in Lent – we see that Jesus' first day on the job is a rather challenging one. No sooner had Jesus accepted his mission and ministry – and God the Father confirms his identity as the Son of God – than Satan our accuser and adversary tries to steal it. Identity theft has been going on for a very long time.

Our Lord's first day on the job finds him being driven by the third person of the trinity (the Holy Spirit) into the wilderness for a showdown in the desert. Here he will go to the mat with the devil for 40 days.

What does the word 'desert' bring to your mind? Do you see or imagine wild beasts and a wasteland? In all honesty the desert is not an inviting place in biblical literature. The deserts I have known from scouting were dry and dusty places – hot in the day – cool at night – scorpions and rattlesnakes and weird vegetation.

However many of the prophecies of the Old Testament and New promise the transformation of such locations and places – to where streams of water now flow – and crooked places are made straight.

John the Baptist went to the desert early in his life – so he would develop and acquire those appetites and longings and desires to serve God and not man. He would hunger and thirst for righteousness. The cathedral church in Jerusalem would not allow him to do that.

In seminary we were exposed to a whole body of Christian writings from the desert fathers. In the desert they could hear and respond to the call of God upon their lives.

Here the Spirit could purge from the believer all the excuses and distractions that allow our identity to be shaped by culture and its trappings. In the desert a different kind of healing stream could nudge and nurture the human spirit in its obedience to God. A deep immersion – a single-mindedness – could be birthed for the purposes of God.

One of the biggest demands now in the travel and tourist industry is the concept of the wilderness vacation. Somehow in the midst of our busy and over packed lives – the wilderness helps to bring us back to the basics. As people begin to unpack their

busy lives and simplify them – it brings a sense of rest and renewal to them. Here they discover and discern what really is important in life. The wilderness journey can awaken in us a sense of gratitude. I remember once going through a very dark time and realizing that not giving up and surrendering was the victory in itself.

As Dr. Stanley Menking taught us at Drew Seminary – “Every road leads you nowhere when you don’t know where you are going.” If in the wilderness the crooked places become straight so we can discern the road God would have us follow.

Our lesson today teaches us that the stakes are very high when we say “**Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God.**” Bishop Willimon reminds us “If Christ is our King – the stakes are high. The usual controlling bodies of media – public opinion – the quest for security – the lifestyle of acquisition have no sovereignty over us. The authority of Christ is not just another voice – it is the only voice to which we need to respond. Not to embrace Christ as King is to continue to bow before the countless sovereigns of the world. Not to listen to Christ is to face the whirlwind of voices demanding our attention and obedience – with all the spin doctors of culture weaving their webs of half-truths.”¹

However, the Bible – unlike the spin doctors of our culture – tells the shocking truth about us. The Bible as we shared three weeks ago – does not flatter us.

With the creation of the first man and woman – we are not introduced to a nicer world. The world pictured is not an ideal world – the kind advertised in travel posters. Sin and suffering and injustice are not glossed over. God must work deeply – patiently – sacrificially to clean up the mess created by humanity and history.²

So as we open our lesson today, “The same tempter who had found a fatal spot of vulnerability in Adam and Eve now aims his strategy against Jesus with deadly accuracy.”³

Now let us turn to our Old Testament lesson. Moses is preparing his people to enter the Promised Land. The sermons that he shares in the book of Deuteronomy are to remind them of their true identity as the children of God and not of Egypt.

He is reminding them WHO they are – and **WHOSE** they are. Unfortunately the lessons learned from the wilderness are ignored and forgotten. God would raise up prophets and priests to remind them of their identity – but unfortunately they always sought another. Most scholars believe that Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness echo those of Israel in the desert as well. Remember, when the people of Israel were hungry. They got angry at Moses and wondered why he had brought them out in the desert only to die. As a matter of fact, they wanted to go back to Egypt and assume the identity they had just been rescued from. Some things never seem to change in human history. Not only had Moses had to take his people out of Egypt – he had to purge Egypt out of them.

Gratefully, where Israel fails, Jesus is faithful to his identity and calling. The way and truth that Jesus reveals in the wilderness is our way to victory as well. The temptations that Jesus experiences reflect the temptations that will come to us all.

Today we will speak of the wilderness not only as a geographical location – but as a region of the human spirit and dimension of human experience.⁴

There are three temptations that come to Jesus. Let us look at them.

THE FIRST TEMPTATION IS TO TURN A STONE INTO A LOAF OF BREAD.

Satan says, “If you are the Son of God” He tries to cleverly maneuver Jesus into a response. In a world where 20% of the human race goes to bed hungry – and 42% of the children of a local school district live below the poverty level – this is a tempting offer. Remember our Lord taught us in his prayer that it is proper to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” He knows of the importance of both our physical and our spiritual hungers. The temptation is to bypass God in order to do something good.⁵

As Eugene Peterson reminds us “bread – necessary as it is – is not primary. God is the priority. Jesus will let nothing – not even necessary things – interfere with this fundamental priority. Jesus will not use God to get what he wants – but submits himself to being what God wants. Jesus knew his mission was to lead us to acquire new appetites – a hunger for righteousness.⁶

An alarm goes off for Jesus – a warning – a red flag so to speak. The offer grabs his attention – because of his conscience and orientation to life.

In **John 4:34**, “my food,” said Jesus “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” Jesus knew the deepest hunger – beneath all other hungers was our hunger for God. Jesus will not respond by the devil’s standard – but by God’s.

In God’s word – the book of Deuteronomy – it clearly reveals “Man does not live by bread alone.” This is not an escape from our concern for social justice – but really centering all our work in God’s purpose – and not anyone else’s. Jesus did feed hungry people and crowds. The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle that appears in all 4 gospels. However, he fed hungry people and crowds to do God’s will and not his own. Jesus never acted independently of the Father’s will – neither should we.

THE SECOND TEST FOR JESUS IS TO ACQUIRE AND USE POWER AND AUTHORITY FOR HIS OWN PURPOSES.

Jesus knew what worship was really all about. It is to ascribe worth and honor and dominion. Power – as appealing as it is – is not primary – God is. Jesus will not negotiate for power with the Evil One – even though he could use it benevolently. Love and honor must not be coerced. It must come from a heart set free.

Jesus knew Satan had been thrown out of heaven because he wanted to be worshipped – he wanted to be like God. He offered many kingdoms to our Lord – but they were kingdoms with a small ‘k.’ Jesus had already committed himself to the kingdom of God. Jesus knew the awesome power of worship to shape hearts and lives. Jesus knew that the strongholds of evil have been defeated by the power of God’s word. That is why the authority of God is the foundation of all worship in the Wesleyan tradition.

Because worship shapes our lives – Jesus’ life was in great shape. Lent is a great time for us to determine what shape we are in. Trial and error is a tough way to learn and live – especially when God makes known his will and way for us. The opposite of worship is wandering. In worship we give our attention to God. We listen and seek his truth and guidance. Worship keeps us connected to God.

The reason that sin is so dangerous is that it cuts us off from intimacy with God. It is worship that keeps strong our allegiance to God – so we don’t trade our God-given identities – for a much lesser one. Not much progress is made in the journey of faith without the discipline of worship. There was an important reason Jesus spent time at the synagogue and Temple. Jesus could say a resounding “No” – to Satan’s offer because he had already committed to another kingdom.

THE THIRD TEST OF JESUS IS TO LIVE LIFE BY POPULARITY POLLS RATHER THAN THE PURPOSE OF GOD.

My mentor, Eugene Peterson, reminds us “Miracles – attractive as they are – are not primary – God is. Jesus will not use God as a means of showing off – or attracting admirers. Jesus will not engage in miracle-making that dazzles or entertains.⁷ Jesus is about calling disciples – not admirers. John Lennon once remarked at the height of the success of the Beatles that they were ‘more popular than Jesus.’ Jesus was never about popularity. His words and call go much deeper than that.

As the offer comes to Jesus – once again an alarm goes off. Once again Jesus will not put God to the test. As Adam and Eve failed in the garden – and the nation of Israel in the wilderness and desert – Jesus emerges victorious. Jesus demonstrates his calling and identity by dying on a cross – not jumping off a building.

The value of testing is to reveal what you have centered your life around and whose voice you are paying attention to. Jesus was centered and committed to the voice of the eternal. All other voices set off an alarm that empowered him to say, “No.” Jesus was faithful to his identity and calling as God’s son. Jesus’ mission was to undo what went wrong in the garden. He refused any offer that was not God’s offer – even if it included a cross. Only the cross can lead us back home to God.

Lent is the season to take spiritual inventory and ask the hard questions. We change our center – exchange our wisdom for His. If you need wisdom and discernment – ask for it. Resisting evil and ministering to human need are not left to will power and psychic strategies; the effective presence of God is offered and available.⁸

Lent can teach us to turn away from our wants – and instead focus ourselves on our truest need – which is God. This is what Israel forgot in the wilderness – and Jesus reestablishes in his showdown in the desert. May that be the lesson learned anew today.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
February 21, 2010 – 10:30 a.m. only – First Sunday in Lent
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ENDNOTES

¹ William H. Willimon, **“Pulpit Resource, volume 38, No. 1, Year C,”** Jan-March, 2010, pages 35-36. Bishop Willimon quotes Alice Camille.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator,** NavPress, Colorado Spring, CO, 2007, page 17.

³ Philip Yancey, **THE JESUS I NEVER KNEW,** Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995, page 70.

⁴ R. Maurice Boyd, **THE FINE ART OF BEING IMPERFECT,** Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1998, page 114.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator,** NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1489.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS,** Harper Collins Publishers, New York, N. Y., 1993, January 27th devotion.

⁷ Ibid, **PRAYING WITH JESUS,** January 28th devotion.

⁸ Fred B. Craddock, [et. al.], **“Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR C,”** Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, first edition, 1994, page 140.