

Temptations for Jesus and Us
Genesis 2: 15 – 17; 3: 1 – 7 Matthew 4: 1 – 11
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About a month ago, I preached a sermon about the significance of Jesus' baptism. If you remember, as he came up out of the water he heard the words, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." In response to that life-changing event, it appears that Jesus immediately took himself into the wilderness. The text indicated that he was led by the Spirit to be tempted. This is a very curious way to say it. Why on earth would the Spirit want Jesus to be tempted? If we put the question in perspective, Jesus' journey to the wilderness is not so surprising. He was a human being, after all. His baptismal experience must have been stunning. Usually when humans experience life-changing events, they are motivated to engage in some serious self-examination. Perhaps that was so for Jesus, too.

In some small way, I can relate to what he was going through. A number of years ago, "just for the experience of it", I decided to apply for a Chaplain's position at the Maine State Prison. I had absolutely no expectation of being offered the job, nor did I intend to take it if offered. Much to my surprise, at the end of the interview, the Deputy Warden offered me the job and told me to think about it for a day or two before giving him my final decision. I remember driving back to my home in Massachusetts, terrified by what had just happened. I kept praying out loud, "God, you wouldn't do this to me, would you?" I needed time to think, to be in a space where I could get enough perspective, and to determine if this was the right path for me to take. After a few days, I called to accept the job, having spent some fruitful time in my own wilderness.

What can we learn from Jesus' wilderness experience? One thing we can learn is that he does it on purpose, putting himself into a place (the wilderness), and a condition (by means of forty days of not eating), that takes him to the core of his inner being. To understand more deeply, we could make use of an image from John the Baptist. John sees himself as baptizing with water for repentance, but then refers to Jesus as the one coming from God. In John's words, Jesus has "His winnowing fork in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So we might imagine that when Jesus enters the wilderness and begins his fast, he is walking onto a metaphorical threshing floor where his "wheat" will be identified and gathered up, and his "chaff" will be burned away. Through the process of his temptations, he reaches to the level of essential questions about the relationship between his self-interest and his life purpose. We can learn much from paying careful attention to the nature of his temptations.

When Jesus is hungry from fasting, the Devil tempts him in three ways. The first temptation invites Jesus to demonstrate with supernatural power that he really has the credentials to be the Messiah, and he is to do this by addressing his hunger, that is to say, his discomfort. Then the Devil takes Jesus to a high place and tempts him to prove that God will keep him safe. Finally, the Devil offers Jesus the power to possess the surrounding kingdoms.

One way of looking at these temptations demonstrates that they are, for him, and by the way, represent for us, human desires – desires **for comfort, for safety, for power, and for status**. Jesus needs to know what he is made of and where his spiritual foundation is in order to embark on his ministry with any real authority. Returning to John's image, any selfish desires for comfort, safety,

power, or status can be understood as the “chaff” that will be burned away. These common human desires have the potential to undermine, if not destroy, the meaning of his life and ministry.

Right here is where this sermon becomes difficult. The journey into the wilderness is not something that Jesus alone had to accomplish. We, as his disciples, are called to follow him. And this is no easy task. Even for Jesus it proved to be a difficult undertaking. Still, our hope today rests in Jesus’ demonstration of an ultimately meaningful journey.

So, what does this wilderness journey look like for us? It might be fair to say that the first part of the process is learning to be able to distinguish our “wheat” from our “chaff”. Our culture (and the political rhetoric we have come to expect), promises that everyone should be able to have comfort, safety, power, and status. These sound like desirable qualities to have in life, but if we don’t stop to think from a spiritual perspective, then we readily accept comfort, safety, power, and status as our legitimate rights (even when we know that we can have these things only if others sacrifice, or are sacrificed, for our benefit). Furthermore, they make it sound like these qualities are all we need for a meaningful life.

Just listen to what the politicians are saying. Most of our political discourse and decisions these days seem to be motivated by promises of comfort, safety, power, and status. So what do we make of the fact that Jesus undergoes a winnowing process precisely to avoid being taken in by the very things that society promises?

Perhaps Jesus knows something that we need to learn. As inviting as those promises are, there is a steep cost for accepting them. The more we depend on our systems and structures to provide these entitlements for us, the more we risk losing our own integrity and authority. Or as Jesus said, “What does it benefit [us] if we gain the whole world and lose our souls?” Our souls are directly connected to our integrity: to our ability to embody the image of God. Our souls are not connected to our ability to obtain comfort, safety, power, and status.

Just for the record, I am not advocating the support of unjust systems. People need the basics of life and are often denied those basics by systems that encourage greed and envy. As Christians, we have an obligation to work for systemic justice issues. All I am saying is that our baptism and our call to follow Christ can easily be undermined by any system that promises us a full measure of comfort, safety, power, and status. Looked at another way, what if our politicians changed their rhetoric so rather than promising a comfortable life, they promised challenge, creativity, and meaningful community? What if our individual and collective goal was to live in harmony and loving relationship with one another and with the world even if it meant having less of those promised goodies?

Right now in this church when you are between “called” ministers, one of the essential tasks facing you is to discern the nature of your ministry to this community. You are engaged in the process of considering what it means to do the work of the gospel. It comes down to a question like this: What is it that we want to be able to tell people about the nature of our experience and hope as Christians? Do we want to sound like politicians or prophets?

There were many people who came to John the Baptist because they believed that the world was coming to an end and they were afraid of being judged negatively. They were not looking to live with integrity. They were not interested in living into the image of God in which they were created.

They just wanted to stay out of divine trouble and receive divine blessing. When Jesus came to John and insisted on being baptized, he was setting a different standard. The life of faith that he demonstrated was not simply to stay in God's good graces. He demonstrated that a life of faith was intimately connected with the threshing floor. By means of the winnowing process that takes place on the threshing floor and in the wilderness, human beings are purified and come to their fullness. It is a process of spiritual transformation, and if we choose to follow Christ, it is our process, too. It constitutes our baptism by fire and spirit. Can we, as we reach out to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ, testify to the importance of this process in our religious experience?

To be acceptable to God and to be loved by God takes no effort at all. That is God's gracious and freely given gift to all of us. However, to live a life of fullness and to grow into our maturity is a life-long and challenging process. One of the reasons churches are so important is that they provide support as we go through the winnowing process. We all need support, encouragement, and celebration. Those can only happen in community. They can only happen when people take the time to get to know one another and to be known. And, these things can only happen when we have help to identify and burn away the chaff that insulates us from real life. The world will not stop trying to tempt us into settling for superficial commodities like comfort, safety, power, and status. But, in a community of faith, we can choose to face and come through the temptations in the wilderness just like Jesus did. He has led the way. May we be bold enough to follow.