

1 Lent C
Luke 4:1-13
Feb. 14, 2016
the temptation of self-reliance

Temptation and the wilderness story mark the start of Lent.

On Ash Wednesday, Brian Lennstrom gave an excellent homily (posted on our website). Brian urged us to give up two things, 'religion,' and 'seeking advantage'. He suggested that there is a theological (mis)understanding shared by many: that God keeps score. That God might keep score inspires some to appear particularly religious during Lent, and to 'give up' something they like (such as chocolate) or know they shouldn't do (like swearing) – this public piety and giving up are a little like deciding to be good around Christmastime so we will get more gifts from Santa.

We don't earn our salvation. God's love is unconditional. Being extra pious and giving up incidental things are not what Lent is about.

Wilderness and temptation.

In the northwest, wilderness is dense forests, wolves howling in the night and bears foraging in our unguarded back-packs.

The wilderness of the Holy Lands is not that kind of place, nor is it like the Sahara desert, with barren shifting sands. The wilderness of the Holy Lands is sparse rocky countryside that greens up only briefly in short periods of rain. It appears to be uninhabited. It's not, of course, but it looks that way.

In Luke's story, the wilderness is a place of solitude and refreshment to which Jesus retires after his Baptism, when Jesus is 'full of the Holy Spirit'. The wilderness is the stage for Jesus' contemplation and rejection of the seductive temptations of the world.

Each year, this wilderness story resonates a little differently – in part because each Gospel tells the story differently, but mostly because we hear it in the context of our current experience.

Our world is deeply troubled by a mass migration of people pouring from the mid-East into Europe. Russia and North Korea are rattling sabers of nationalism. The Zeta virus is threatening a generation of unborn children. The lead poisoning of the water in Flint, Michigan bears long-term health and social implications. Regardless of where we are on the political spectrum, we know that our political and economic structures are undergoing profound upheaval. We are, individually and collectively, highly anxious, fearful about the future.

We feel powerless and vulnerable, and we don't like that. That makes us lash out, seek to control whatever we can. Flex our muscles, so to speak.

So when I read the Gospel this week, what stood out was : *‘When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.’* Is this such a time? Perhaps it is. Our fear and vulnerability suggest that is so.

I keep coming back to this: Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit; he was accompanied by the Spirit throughout his forty days; and Jesus left still filled with the Spirit. The Spirit strengthens Jesus against temptation and he is delivered from evil. The next verse of Luke’s Gospel reads:

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee. Luke 4:14

There is great comfort in knowing that the Spirit stays with us wherever we go. The Spirit did not stay behind at Jesus’ baptism, nor at our baptisms. We do not worship a God whose presence is limited to a particular experience or place. Even in the wilderness of our lives and in the face of temptation, God’s presence abides. Our capacity, our strength to repent, to resist temptation, to move forward, grows out of our relationship with God and the grace of God’s deliverance. Not something we earn, but surely something we need.

That God’s presence is our strength is a key message in today’s Gospel.

I believe the great temptation of our time is that “we can do it ourselves”: the complacency of believing God is no longer necessary or present. This complacency is more or less synonymous with the secular world view that interprets life apart from a covenant relationship with God.

“We can do it ourselves” is rooted in spiritual forgetfulness. Forgetting our faith story – what God has done for us – not just the story from Abraham to the birth of Christ, but what God has done in our lives personally. Giving us life, abundance. When we forget our faith story, that leads us to self-reliance, then to self-serving acts, to self-gratification, and ultimately, to the most fear-filled conclusion: that we are alone. Wilderness becomes unrelenting solitude.

In Deuteronomy, the Israelites are reminded that the Lord is the source of their blessings. The Lord commands them to celebrate their deliverance and the abundance they received, and to share with the aliens who live among them. The continuing remembrance through the offering of first fruits would keep them from forgetting their faith story ; it would help them remember that without God they would never have been set free from their bondage, nor grown the fruit on this land.

As Jesus taught us, we pray, ‘lead us not into temptation.’ In that beloved phrase I hear clearly, ‘lead us not into the temptation of *self*-reliance.’ Let us remember that God is God, and we are not.

The devil in the wilderness plays a role not unlike that of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The devil and the serpent are metaphors, personifications if you will, of the forces of evil in this

world. The devil tries to lure Jesus away from his focus on God's will – much as Adam and Eve were tempted to eat from the tree of knowledge to become *like* God, not *obedient to* God. The devil tempts Jesus to acquire kingdom and power as self-serving acts.

If you are the Son of God... The devil appeals to ego and misuse of relationship. The devil is not disputing *whether* Jesus is the Son of God. A better translation of the Greek would be 'since you are.' **Since** you are the Son of God, turn the stone to bread. **Since** you are the Son of God, go ahead – throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple. I will give you all the kingdoms of the world if you turn away from God.

Surely to feed the hungry, to rule the world with justice, to gain eternal life would be good things in Jesus hands.

The devil is quite clever at confusing motive and loyalty, morality and gratitude – urging us to do the right thing for the wrong reason. Charitable giving based on a belief that God keeps score, or punishes if you don't give – makes the gift a matter of self-interest. Doing things to get into heaven, pure self-interest. Right things, wrong reason. Deuteronomy is clear that we should do the right things out of gratitude for all that God has done for us, not out of fear.

But that's the problem with temptations – they confuse us. We are reactive, not thinking through consequences. Sometimes, the appeal is to *wants* not *needs*, as it was for Adam and Eve. God provides what we need to live a meaningful life, but we *want* more power, more control, especially in anxious time. The devil suggests that we can do all things and more on our own, without God.

Jesus never once questions the ability of the devil to deliver on his promises. Why?

Here is the hook: the devil is promising the very things, the glory, the power and the kingdom, which Jesus already has. Jesus will feed the hungry and bring near the Kingdom of God. Jesus will pass from this life into eternal life. Jesus is neither self-reliant, nor self-serving. 'Your will, not mine,' he prays.

Worship the Lord your God and serve only him. Jesus chooses service over worldly power. Jesus did not have to prove himself to the devil, he was already empowered by God's Spirit. And so it is with us. We, too, received the promises of baptism. We are already living into eternal life, and entrusted with abundant blessings. We, too, are empowered by the Spirit.

At his baptism, Jesus experienced a profound call, and from that followed a profound question – How shall I live out this call? He needed time alone to absorb, to contemplate.

Perhaps you have experienced the need for a time-out – not for making a choice, not because you are conflicted, but to sort yourself out. Silence to listen for God's voice. Silence to set aside the background noise of every day life.

Wilderness time sets the stage for personal growth, for gathering authenticity in a new role: an impending marriage, the death of a close family member, the birth of a child. Who and how will you be as you emerge in this new role as spouse, as widow, as parent? In the chrysalis, the formative stage, the temptations of power, of ego, of doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, appear. The temptation to think ‘I can do it by myself.’

Like Jesus’ baptism, our baptisms were marked by the sacramental expectation of profound change in our lives. Still, many of us were baptized as infants, and the question, *how will I live out this new self?* arose in the hearts of our parents and godparents, not our own.

This question of the identity of our baptized self remains open all our lives. Our forty days of Lent are a time for vigil and preparation for ministry. We are invited to a wilderness timeout to renew our baptized self, always remembering that God is the source of all blessings.

Since you are baptized....

Amen.

The Rev. Diane Ramerman
Feb. 14, 2016