

Lent 1
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March 1, 2020

As our gospel lesson for today talks about Jesus going out into the wilderness, it reminds me of some of the camping trips our family used to go on to get away from it all and enjoy the beauties of nature. It was really good for us in many ways, and it reminded me of a Native American saying that I learned when I was young that says, "those who are closest to nature are closest to God." Because when you get away from the hustle and bustle of our every day lives and get out into God's creation, you can really feel that, a sense of calm and peace, that everything's going to be OK. Now I know camping may not be for everyone, and getting out into nature may not affect us all in the same way, I know people who are scared to death of being out in the wilderness, but as we embrace this season of Lent, it is important for each of us to find some time for reflection, a time and place for retreat, a time to experience God.

When our family would take time to get away and enter the wilderness on these camping trips, our main intention would be to just get away from where we'd been, but eventually we'd come to appreciate the place that we had come to, and get out and explore the park or nature reserve that had become our temporary home, and see what we might find by hiking along the trails. Most parks have the trails pretty well marked nowadays, and there are maps available, with the distance of different trails, sometimes more information than you really want if you want to imagine that you're really out in the wilderness. But at times the trail would not be well marked and we would have to rely more on ourselves to find our way.

I can remember many times that after hiking some distance we would come to a fork in the road, where we would have to make a choice. Which path do we take? Do we take the high road into the hills where there may be some great views, but it may also be dangerous, rocky and difficult to travel, or do we take the low road by a riverbed that helps us know where we are, but takes us deeper into the wilderness? One path could get us lost, one could take us home, one path may be easy, the other difficult. One could lead to a dead end, maybe even death, another to the beauties of life. In our text for today, Jesus was also confronted with a fork in the road, and he too had to make a choice, a choice that would decide the course of his ministry.

Now Jesus had just been baptized by John in the river Jordan, where God affirmed that this Jesus was the chosen one. And then suddenly, "Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Now doesn't that seem strange? It is the Holy Spirit that leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tested, not the devil. Did the devil and the Holy Spirit have some type of arrangement going here? Did Jesus have an appointment that he had to keep?

Well, first, let's clarify a few things. The devil described in Matthew is NOT the horned creature with a fiendish face who smells of sulfur. That perspective of the devil, as the source of all evil, is NOT what Matthew is talking about. The devil in our text for today

serves a purpose. Now there's another unusual idea, that Satan actually serves a purpose, but for Satan to serve the purpose of testing the loyalty of humanity, is not a new idea. In the Old Testament book of Job, for example, we find this, where God strikes a type of gentleman's agreement, where Satan is allowed to test Job.

In fact throughout the Old Testament, Satan is not an evil force who moves on his own initiative to maliciously toy with humanity. In the Old Testament, Satan actually works for God. So it's important that we understand this, as we read from different parts of the Bible, because in the Old Testament, the word "Satan" is more like a job description, than a personification of evil. It means "adversary" or "accuser." It was the job of Satan to call humanity to account for their failure to uphold their end of God's covenant law. While the portrait of Satan is much different in the New Testament, in the account of Jesus' temptation in Matthew we still see the same relationship between Satan and the spirit of God. The Holy Spirit, in a sense, sends Jesus to Satan, confident that he will resist the temptations offered him and be proved worthy of his calling. It's as if the ancients felt that without the test of temptation, loyalty to God was cheap and not to be trusted. Jesus was required to be steadfast, unwavering in his purpose, and so the only way to do that is by being tested. The devil, then, is the "one who tests, the one who separates," the one who separates us from our purpose, who distracts us, who singles us out, and tempts us to fail, in remaining faithful.

There are many coercive influences in our life that also fit that description, and it's important to recognize them because every day we will be tempted. So in our faith life, if we are unsure of our purpose, or distracted by selfish desires, or if we're procrastinating...or just unwilling to make a commitment to serve God in some way, then this adversary must be winning in our lives. The tempter has led us on another path. That is the nature of temptation. It is a fork in the road, the leading of the Holy Spirit splits off in one direction, and the opportunity of the devil takes another, and we must choose.

But does God really tempt us and cause us suffering just to see what we're made of? Or does a whole lot of suffering come from OUR Contempt for being dependent on God? Well let's look at our first lesson, the familiar creation story of Adam and Eve, the story of the fall, and original sin. The popular notion is that temptation comes from the outside, that it comes to us by something apart from God and in opposition to God, in the case of Adam and Eve it was the crafty serpent.

But, if we examine the passages closely, it is clear that while testing comes from the outside, temptation comes from within. The **desire** to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil comes from Adam and Eve. Rather than live as recipients of God's gifts, Adam and Eve are willing to risk everything, including their very lives, for a chance at being like God. "You will be like God, knowing good from evil," they are told, so they have to make a choice, and they give in to the temptation. This tendency, for us to take rather than receive, infects all of our lives. We even shape our economic and political structures in that image, to protect our own interests at the expense of others, and it even creeps into the tiny choices we make every day between loving and

resisting love. So blaming the serpent, blaming the adversary is pointless, we have met the enemy and the enemy is us.

And the adversary, the temptation, can take many forms. For us, perhaps the temptation is to fill every minute of the day, for fear that empty moments will find us haunted by something we'd rather not face. Perhaps our temptation is to work night and day to prove we are worth having around, terrified that somebody will not value us if we stop for even a moment. Perhaps our temptation involves clinging to keep control of our lives, but much of that sense of control is an illusion. I think it's ironic that the technology we use to keep us in control to keep us in touch with each other, winds up controlling us and actually may be keeping us out of touch with what is really important. And temptation also comes through coveting, pride, and ambition, all of these can offer alternatives to us, from taking the path led by the Spirit.

We are weak in the face of temptation, but it can be overcome. Knowing our weakness, Christ taught us to pray "lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil." I know many of us begin our day with prayer, and many of us keep the spiritual disciplines of regular prayer, worship, and study of the word of God. Many of us practice sacrificial giving, caring for and serving others, and are committed to growing our faith. These are ways to keep us on the right path, these are ways of choosing the spirit in the face of the opportunity of the devil. And we can nourish ourselves and one another in these ways, to keep us steadfast in the faith. Paul calls this taking on the whole armor of God. And when we live in the spirit, and put on that whole armor of God, we are assured of success in our battle with temptation, because God promises we will never be tested beyond our means.

But at times we will fail and give in to temptation. So what did Jesus do?

Well, when the tempter arrives in the wilderness, he gave Jesus three excellent offers, to command stones into bread, to create a miracle, and to assume control of all nations, all three with immense possibilities for good. But Jesus resists and survives the ultimate test. So how did he do it? It wasn't by quoting scripture, because even Satan quoted scripture to make his case. And Jesus' victory wasn't achieved by simply denouncing the devils' offers. In fact, in the course of his ministry he did feed the poor, he did perform wonders among the people, and his ministry did have and continues to have enormous political impact on the nations of the world. Jesus survived the test by refusing to try to be like God or to be God. As Paul put it, he "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." He did not use God to claim something for himself. He remained faithful, obedient to the end. And it was this serving, suffering, dying Jesus whom God vindicated by raising him from the dead. Jesus was victorious, and his victory is our victory, by grace through faith.

As we move forward in our Lenten journey this week let us all consider the fork in the road before us. Which path is full of temptation? Which path are we called to follow? When we feel like we're in the wilderness, those are the times when we need to practice the discipline of our faith and take time to be with God, for the Holy Spirit will direct us where we need to go. Amen.