

A sermon preached on Luke 4:1-13. Lent 1C

The season of Lent always begins with the story of Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, where he has gone to fast and pray in preparation for the journey that lies ahead – a journey that will eventually take him to Jerusalem and a hill called Golgotha. Though the cross looms ahead there are yet many miles to travel, many stories to be told, and many lives to touch, in fulfillment of his calling as God's beloved son.

In a strange reversal of order examination follows initiation as Jesus, still dripping wet from his Baptism in the Jordan, is led by that same heavenly dove into the barren, desolate landscape of Judea. There he will encounter for the first, but certainly not the last time, the powers of evil that seek to subvert to its own ends all that is good and faithful and loving in this world.

Though the wilderness has always been characterized as a spiritual landscape – a place of preparation, of waiting, a place where God is encountered – in our modern world it seems like the least likely place to encounter the temptations of life. After all, isn't it the lures of the big city that threaten to undo us, not life amongst scrub brush, undomesticated animals and boulders? Isn't that why people

flock to Las Vegas and not Death Valley? What possible temptation could there be for someone alone in the wilderness?

As I thought about that question I began to wonder about all those things we normally consider to be temptations - those things we know we shouldn't do, but do anyway especially if we can justify to ourselves why we deserve them or if we think no one will find out about them. You know the things I'm talking about. They run the gamut from helping ourselves to that extra piece of chocolate cake to helping ourselves to some of the company funds; from cheating on the crossword puzzle to cheating on our spouse. Barbara Brown Taylor refers to them as our "pacifiers," those habits, substances, activities or surroundings we use to comfort ourselves to block out pain and fear.

Most of those things we call temptations - those pacifiers -are not really temptations at all. They are, in fact, mere distractions designed to help us avoid acknowledging and facing the real temptation, which is something much deeper, more fundamental, and more dangerous than any pacifier could be. And it is only when we are all alone in the wilderness away from the distractions, stripped of those pacifiers that we are likely to meet and struggle with the real temptation - the temptation to forget our true identity

as beloved children of God, to forget who we are and to whom we ultimately belong.

I don't think it is a coincidence that Jesus went directly from his Baptism into the wilderness to face temptation before he began his public ministry. At his baptism Jesus identity had been confirmed - beloved Son of God, nourished by the word of God, called to a life of ultimate meaning, purpose, and sacrifice. The deeper temptation was to forget that - to take another path, to forge another identity, to become someone other than whom God created him to be. In the wilderness, the place without boundaries, it is easy to lose one's way.

We read in Luke's gospel that every temptation was prefaced by the phrase, "If you are the Son of God," chipping away, raising doubts about his identity. And every temptation was, as Fred Craddock says, an offer to rise not to fall. After all, in the garden of Eden the serpent didn't say to Adam and Eve, "Do you want to be like me?" No it said, "Do you want to be as God." No self-respecting Satan would come with an offer of personal, social and professional ruin. That is in the fine print at the bottom of the contract.

Luke gives us a sense of the struggle that Jesus faced. Scholars are in remarkable agreement in their interpretation of this passage about Jesus facing an adversary who almost comes across as a

"friend" offering things that sound perfectly reasonable and good at first. After all, why shouldn't Jesus satisfy his hunger with a little bread, - no need to be uncomfortable; and wouldn't it be great if Jesus ruled the world instead of the hated Romans, and how impressive would it be if Jesus flung himself off the temple roof and a thousand angels came to rescue him? Why if Jerusalem witnessed that one amazing feat early on in Jesus' ministry surely he could accomplish his mission.

The first temptation - turning bread into stones – was material: Would Jesus' ministry be one of providing his own and other's material needs? The second temptation was political: Would Jesus submit to the ruler of this world in order to achieve good for the people of this world? The third temptation was spiritual: Would Jesus win the people of Israel by use of supernatural powers? Stones to bread - the hungry hope so; take political power - the oppressed hope so; leap from the temple - those longing for proof of God's power among us hope so. Real temptation beckons us to do that about which much good can be said. And the devil not only offers attractive things but backs them up by quoting *Scripture*, which just shows how easily the Bible can be, and has been, used for entirely wrong purposes.

Jesus had no problem with the ends - it was the means. He would feed the hungry crowds and attend to people's physical wellbeing, but he also knew that all the material comfort in the world cannot feed the soul. He would confront the powers and principalities, but he also understood the limits and dangers of political power. And he would overcome death, not by some cheap trick, but by facing it squarely, trusting that the One who created him would not abandon him. He achieved all those ends, but he did it by remaining true to his identity and to the One who sent him.

Forty days and forty nights is a long time. It must have been one hell of a struggle. And do not doubt that it was a struggle for him for the burden placed by his baptism was great. His ministry would last three years. This would not be his last wilderness experience.

In her meditation, *Lent Darkness*, Kathy Galloway vividly describes the journey into the wilderness.

Dragons lurk in desert spaces,
Penetrating the mind with evil claw.
Serpents' teeth seek out the chinks
Insidiously, relentlessly, gnawing on the bone;
Searching out the interstices of muscle and sinew.

Such is the pain of the wilderness.
Alone, alone, alone,
Christ sits
In the waste place of abandoned pleas and
Questions
Until exhausted.
Finally

At last
The realization
Comes
That in the end
There is only
God.

Lent is our forty days and forty nights – our time to enter the wilderness and struggle against that which threatens to undermine our baptismal identity. It is a time to leave our favorite pacifiers behind, and as Taylor says, “encounter the world without anesthesia, to find what life is like with no comfort but God.” Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves. No pacifier is too small Taylor reminds us – shopping, a candy bar, the end of a long day drink. After all, if we cannot let go of our little pacifiers, how can we be expected to make the larger sacrifices when called to do so.

Don't be surprised, however, if after a day or two you hear that voice inside your head telling you what will happen if you give up your pacifier. “You'll starve. You'll go nuts.” “You won't be yourself anymore.” If that doesn't work then the voice will move to level two, “That's not a pacifier, that's just a stress reducer. Can't you tell the difference?” If you don't fall for that one there is always level three: “If God really loves you then you can do whatever you want.

Besides, you deserve it, you work really hard. Why waste your time on this dumb exercise anyway.” If you have any doubt about whose voice that is, go back and read Luke’s gospel again.

This Lenten season I invite you to risk a wilderness experience. Perhaps just as Jesus and countless others through the ages have discovered, alone, stripped of all distractions, of the pacifiers that get in the way, you too will find that beyond alone the Holy One waits.