

Harder Than It Looks
March 9, 2014
Matthew 4:1-11

This morning's Scripture reading is found early in Matthew's Gospel. It follows Jesus' baptism, which ended with a voice from heaven affirming Jesus' actions and identity. In our passage Jesus is presented with an opportunity to live into that very identity.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' "

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Holy God, remind us of who we are and whose we are. Strengthen us for our Lenten journey. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Change is a given. It is also something most of us dislike – perhaps more than we are willing to admit.

Who among us wanted the time to change last night?

- Why did we have to lose an hour of life, especially an hour of sleep?
- Why does something so small tend to become something we hold on to and complain about for days or even weeks?

Who among us wanted church to shift from ordinary time to Lent?

- Why did we go from the liturgy we knew and loved to one that includes a time for confession of sin?
- Why did we need to transition from a season of spirituality that could be a marginal part of life to 40 days of heightened spiritual awareness?

Who among us wants to leave Southwest Florida during season in order to relocate to a much colder climate?

- Why would we want to voluntarily return to a place we intentionally left behind – at least for the winter months?
- Why would we trade our tropical island paradise for suburban scenery or to withdrawal into the wilderness?

Whether or not you can answer these questions, this morning you are invited into the wilderness. This opportunity comes with many warning labels. It is an invitation into the unknown, which can be downright uncomfortable.

For me, the idea of intentionally traveling into the wilderness seems strange at best. In the early years of ministry I was introduced to something called a “retreat.” For those of you who may be unfamiliar with such language, retreats are the closest thing to wilderness wandering most modern day city dwellers ever encounter.

Retreats typically begin with a long drive that takes participants from somewhere directly into the middle of nowhere. You know you have arrived at nowhere when your cell phone stops working, when you see far more insects than people, and when the pace of life suddenly slows dramatically.

As you walk winding trails, sit in silence under the stars, and live as simply as possible, you adopt the natural surroundings as your temporary home. Only when the distractions of everyday life fade, do you find yourself ready to embrace the spiritual possibilities of the wilderness.

Our journey into the wilderness to find meaning isn't new. It predates us by thousands of years. In many religious traditions it is a place and an experience that the faithful seek.

Laura Feldt, a professor of history at the University of Southern Denmark¹, explains:

Ideas of natural wildernesses from deep forests, arid deserts, . . . and unthinkable mountains to the depths of the ocean, the rainforest, and the inland ice have played important roles in the history of religions and still do so contemporarily – in religious ideas, narratives, rituals, cosmologies, and in everyday practices.

People go into the wilderness to meet themselves, their demons, and their gods; it is simultaneously framed as a refuge, paradise, waste land, and hell; it is where you can be lead astray, into idolatry or death, or where you can discover a new subjectivity, where you may find the deepest wisdom or the greatest ignorance.²

While wilderness has rich meaning in so many religious traditions, it also has special meaning for those who follow the Way of Jesus. In the Bible the wilderness is a place for physical and spiritual journeying and discovery.

By crafting this morning's account of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness the Gospel writer intends that his readers and hearers will make some connections. He expects that you and I will

- Remember the 40 years of wilderness wanderings by the Israelites, including the provision of manna.
- Recall the time Moses fasted for 40 days and nights while with God on the mountaintop, including the 10 commandments.³

¹ Laura Feldt. <<http://southerndenmark.academia.edu/LauraFeldt>>

² Laura Feldt. *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature* (Hubert and Company, 2012), p.1

³ See Exodus 34

Put in this context, our Jesus looks an awful lot like a new Moses. Immediately following his baptism and hearing the voice of God provide assurance about his identity, Jesus begins a 40 day wilderness experience during which he fasted and faced three challenging temptations.

These three temptations were all designed to play to Jesus' strengths. They were attempts to convince Jesus he should stop relying on God, and trust in his own power. Jesus' responses were consistent and clear; he was committed to continue to depend on God and on God's word.

The first temptation seeks to take advantage of Jesus' physical situation. Anyone who has fasted for any length of time knows how the body reacts, and what it is like to crave food. It is no wonder the tempter started with what was Jesus' most obvious appetite. The appeal went not only to his physical appetite, but also to his ego by suggesting that if he was the Son of God, then he could certainly do something about his lack of food. Rather than turn stones into bread, Jesus quotes Scripture that the fuel for life is something greater than mere bread.

The second temptation seeks to take advantage of the ego assumed of most leaders. Anyone who has held a position of leadership knows that it is far too easy to become prideful and believe the lie that the organization or team is only able to succeed because of the leader's efforts. To make the temptation even more enticing the tempter suggests that Jesus prove he is a religious leader like no other by leaping from the top of the temple in a spectacle that would be seen by crowds and covered by every news agency. Rather than take a flying leap, Jesus quotes Scripture that we are not to test God.

The third and final temptation seeks to take advantage of the human desire for more. Anyone who has known what it is to live with little knows the appeal of being able to have whatever one wants. The tempter suggests that if Jesus is the one coming to rule over a kingdom (to oversee a realm that continually expands) then perhaps he would compromise his methodology in order to achieve an immediate outcome. Rather than worship the tempter, Jesus uses Scripture to reaffirm that God alone is worthy of worship.

These temptations were a part of Jesus' wilderness experience. We must remember that he was fully human, and that these temptations are common to all people.

The most frequently used terms I have heard used to categorize the three are lust of the flesh, pride of life, and lust of the eyes. Another set of labels view the three as temptation to misuses power in three domains: (1) social or cultural, (2) religious, and (3) political.⁴ Using either list, these three broad categories effectively cover just about any temptation you have ever faced or will ever face.

As we start our Lenten journey, I know that general counsel is generally ignored. So while recognizing the presence and prevalence of temptations in Jesus' life and in our own is essential, I also think we need something more.

Alyce McKenzie⁵, professor of preaching, recently provided the answer. She writes:

A couple of years ago, I was leading a Spiritual Formation group at Perkins School of Theology where I teach. It's a required year-long, weekly course. Students explore the history and theology of various classic Christian modes of praying, practice them daily, and gather to share their experiences. The first week their assignment was to start each morning with fifteen minutes of prayer. . . .

The first week I asked my students to do this simple prayer exercise, we gathered and they all admitted that in the rush and anxiety of beginning their classes, they had not been faithful to the task. So I kept the assignment the same for the second week. Again, on gathering, the group admitted they had had trouble being faithful to the call to daily prayer.

"Well," I said, "then for the second week in a row, I have no lesson plan, because we were supposed to talk about the fruits of daily prayer, about what happens in our lives when we pray daily, even for fifteen minutes. So here is the revised lesson plan. Our topic is what happens in your inner life when you don't pray." I went to the white board with my marker. They started

⁴ Richard Rohr. "First Sunday of Lent" in *God for Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Lent and Easter*, ed. By Greg Pennoyer and Gregory Wolfe (Paraclete Press, 2014), p.26.

⁵ Alyce M. McKenzie. <<http://www.smu.edu/Perkins/FacultyAcademics/DirectoryList/McKenzie>>

calling things out. Restlessness. Lack of a center. Poor food choices. Negative self-talk. Insecure feelings. Comparing myself to others. Second-guessing myself. Anxiety. Feeling overwhelmed. Impulse spending. Feeling that I have no focus, and on and on.

I couldn't write fast enough. After about five minutes, they had called out seventy different states of mind and heart that characterized their week and that they connected with the lack of prayer. I wasn't suggesting that prayer solves all problems, but I was encouraging them to give it a chance. Because who wants to spend their week using their abilities for their own gratification only, or taking stupid risks with themselves and others, or gaining the world and losing their souls?

"The greatest Temptation is the Temptation not to pray."⁶

That is it! The temptation story teaches a lesson we all need at the start of Lent as we start a 40 day journey into the wilderness.

Whether it is your tradition to fast from something during Lent or not, you will surely face temptations during this season of heightened spiritual awareness. The only way you will be ready to say no when temptations appear is to stay connected to God through prayer.

40 days is far too long a time to live under your own power, especially if you want to live according to the Way of Jesus. Every day is a new opportunity to say no to the greatest temptation – the temptation not to pray.

Amen.

⁶ Alyce M. McKenzie. "The Greatest Temptation: Reflections on Matthew 4:1-4."
<<http://www.patheos.com//Progressive-Christian/Greatest-Temptation-Alyce-McKenzie-03-05-2014.html>>