

The Wilderness of Temptation

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for 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 splendour; 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. Matthew 4:1-11

TEMPTATION – Difficulty talking about it

We have a variety of views of temptation, and one of our goals for Lent is to have testimony, personal stories from individuals in our congregation who would tell the story of being in the wilderness and how they got out. This is a tall order, I think – taller than I had imagined. Temptation doesn't usually just remain at temptation for most of us. Talking about temptation is really talking about times when we've chosen to sin. I thought for a little while that perhaps I would give the first week's testimony and open the door for more people to have a turn until I realized that would mean standing in front of my congregation and revealing some of my deepest vulnerabilities. I didn't want to talk about something easy like how I'm tempted by dessert on every menu and most often give in. The dessert menu doesn't seem to compare to the temptation that Jesus faced, nor the temptation that each of us face each day. So, how do we even begin to address temptation? Unlike Jesus, most of us are not equipped with scripture when we are confronted with evil.

WILDERNESS OF SIN – original sin vs. human vulnerability

JESUS' EXPERIENCE IN THE WILDNERNESS

But, if we look a little closer at what's happening here, a different picture begins to emerge. It seems clear that Jesus has had a sense of calling for a long time. It may be that he came to the Jordan in order to see if in some way his cousin, John, could confirm the promptings he was already feeling. He was certainly drawn to the Scriptures, to teaching and to some kind of service, since even as a boy he had enjoyed "talking Torah" with the priests in the Temple ([Luke 2:41-52](#)). He must have absorbed his mother's sense of his uniqueness, and when he was baptised, he must have felt the calling being confirmed, and that the time for him to begin his work had come. Paul felt a similar thing after his conversion and was also "led" into solitude and reflection before beginning his work as an apostle ([Galatians 1:16-18](#)). It seems that, when faced with such a calling, it is a natural and healthy reaction for the one called to seek a space to come to terms with their mission and to "be tested" before launching into the demands of ministry. So, in an important sense it was not the Spirit as an outside

force that drove Jesus into the wilderness, as if he could not resist it. Rather, it was the promptings of the Spirit within – his own sense of calling and purpose – which he could choose to follow or not, that drew him, allured him, into this time of preparation and testing.

The same principle can be seen when we look at Jesus' testing. This is not some outside force seeking to lead him astray into actions that he would never have dreamed of doing. Rather, it was the very nature of his calling that was also the point at which he was tested. Everything he was tempted to do here was something he had come to do. Each test was focussed on an aspect of Jesus' mission that he was called to fulfill and that, in time, he would perform. He was tempted to use his power to provide food for himself, but one day he would feed over five thousand hungry people. He was tempted to demonstrate his relationship with God by being saved from the certain death that would come if he threw himself off a high place. Yet, in just a few years, he would be lifted up on a cross to die and then be saved from that death and brought back to life. He was tempted to win over all the nations and their glory – something that he knew was a Messianic promise from [Psalm 2:8](#) – by simply switching allegiances from God to the power that controls the world. Yet, in time he would be able to say *“all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”* ([Matthew 28:18](#)). What is really tempting Jesus here is his own purpose, his own longings, his own mission. He is being tempted, not to do anything different from what he had been called to, but to do it in his own way, in a quick-fix, “avoid-the-real-suffering” way. He is being tempted to impose his own timing, his own methods and his own agenda on his mission. He is tempted by his own capacity to do the right thing in the wrong way. He is being tempted by the drives within himself for satisfaction of his appetites, for fame, power and approval, and for comfort and wealth. For Jesus, as for us, temptation comes, as James says, *“from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away”* ([James 1:14](#)). The three tests signify a sense of completeness. Jesus, by confronting these internal desires has truly *“faced all of the same testings we do, yet He did not sin”* ([Hebrews 4:15](#)).

In terms of Matthew's purpose in the Gospel of portraying Jesus as a new Moses, there are significant resonances with the Israelites – God's chosen people, called to be a blessing to all nations – being led out of Egypt, through the waters of the Red Sea, and into the wilderness to learn to be a community, a nation, a people of God. And as we follow their story we see the same basic pattern playing out. They are led into the wilderness by their desire for freedom, their longing to be the people God has created and called them to be, and they are tested by their own struggle to live up to this calling, and their need for quick-fixes and certain security. This same story is repeated in every life, and in the comparison of Jesus with the Israelites we are given a picture of the consequences – both good and bad – of the choices we make.

What does this mean for us, as we begin the Lenten journey, as we journey with Jesus through this wilderness experience? It means that we must look within and be prepared to confront our tendency to make the end justify the means. It means we must recognise that our light – our sense of purpose and calling – can be as much a temptation as our darkness. It means being prepared to allow the light of God's Spirit and God's word to shine on our hearts and reveal our duplicitous motives, our expedient methods and our arrogant determination to control God's work in and through us. It means that we must recognise that the life we live is always a product of the choices we make, and is not the result of some outside force over which we have no control – be it good or evil.

If we are truly to follow Christ through Lent, it's going to be a journey of honest and painful soul-searching. If we choose to lay all the blame at the door of “the devil” we will find that our mission is compromised and our lives are plagued by the broken desires and attitudes that we have refused to confront. If, on the other hand, we will face our true selves and take the time to understand God's

timing, God's methods and God's agenda, we will find ourselves freed to live as people of integrity, purpose, creativity and vibrancy.

So, in the end, it's not the devil who makes us do anything. The choice is always ours.