

Matthew 4, Temptation in Wilderness and Satan, March 2020

Last month my brother and his wife visited some desirable southwestern desert locations in search of a likely vacation rental for upcoming winters. The areas of Palm Springs, CA and Scottsdale, AZ are among their lead contenders. Phil and I are all for this notion, of course, since the one thing better than having a vacation rental yourself is being related to someone who has one that you can visit. Because of this, an article posted on NBC news last week caught my eye. Apparently a famous pro surfer, by name of Kelly Slater, is considering building a huge Coral Mountain resort in the CA desert near Palm Springs that would feature a giant wave machine, in fact the world's largest artificial wave anywhere. The plus side of this, the article explained, is that one could now enjoy surfing in the desert, the kind of incongruity that is so appealing to our human species! The article suggested this kind of variety would also be a welcome change to all the other developments and resorts in this desert area which feature upscale golf courses. Hmm. Luxury resorts, trendy golf courses, giant wave surfing.....the desert wilderness doesn't seem quite so much like desert or wilderness these days, does it? At least not in the American southwest. In fact, we may equate a trip to the desert wilderness with a chance to have a welcome break from winter and cold, to enjoy warmth and sunshine while staying in an air conditioned facility, to eat high quality cuisine, and generally just bliss out on being pampered. What a contrast all of this is to our Gospel lesson, also set in a desert wilderness, but across the globe and 2000 years ago in time. In fact, not the same kind of thing at all!

This Lenten season, our Gospel lessons, from Matthew and John, will introduce us to stops along the way as Jesus heads towards the cross on Good Friday. And these stops are

revealing and significant in two ways: *where* Jesus is, and *who* Jesus is with. Where and who. Both the wheres and the whos have the capacity to surprise us, as we journey alongside Jesus these next 40 days. And certainly our lesson this morning from Matthew 4 is surprising and dramatic. It presents a stark where for the setting—the desert wilderness- and an alarming who for the companion---Satan. Both are far cries from the golf course and surfing resort in terms of *where* and from the golf caddies, drink servers, and masseuses that would likely wait upon us there in terms of *who*. Let's put ourselves back in time and place Scripturally to better experience this first step in our Lenten journey with Jesus.

First the *where*. Let's think a bit about what wilderness and desert meant within the Scriptural context and for Jesus in our lesson today. We learn he was in the wilderness for 40 days and nights, fasting and praying, and then the tempter showed up. How those preceding 40 days and nights went is not recorded for us. Was it, in part, time that Jesus found serene and refreshing, a solitude and closeness to nature that blessed? In terms of a contemporary equivalent, more like an outward bound solo adventure, obviously, than the stay at the golf resort with the giant wave, but nevertheless a kind of wilderness retreat with some positives? Or was it simply lonely, difficult, long, and maybe scary?

Both aspects of the wilderness are found throughout the Scriptures. Often the number 40 is associated with the wilderness experiences, as it is in today's Gospel lesson. Noah and his family were afloat in a watery wilderness for 40 days and nights, as you recall. Moses spent 40 days on the top of wild Mount Sinai, waiting to receive the 10 commandments. Israel wandered in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land for 40 years. Elijah spent 40 days in the

desert wilderness before receiving new instructions. And now Jesus is 40 days and nights in the wilds. 40 is obviously a significant Biblical number, and it is representative of a long and complete time. After all, 40 days *is* a long time to spend all by yourself in the desert, and 40 years *is* a long time for a people to wander the wilderness. And yet that time spent is valuable time; time of preparation, time of learning to trust God, time of waiting for God to make the next move that leads us forward.

It is certainly worth noting how it is that Jesus comes to *be* in the wilderness. Because sometimes we figure that someone spending 40 days in the wilderness must be lost. But, as Tolkien so famously wrote, “Not all who wander are lost.” Jesus may have wandered through the wilds for 40 days, but it wasn’t because he was lost. He stayed, not because he didn’t know how to leave, but because the time spent there was not yet completed. That 40 day period, the lengthy time of process, was not yet over.

Which might be a good thing for us to remember as we think about our wilderness times, using the wilderness as a *metaphor*, obviously, for times we feel spiritually or psychologically in the wilds. There is a tendency to place blame on ourselves at such times: “Why am I in this situation,” we might wonder, “how did I get so lost?” But one can be in the wilderness without being *lost*. Jesus was.

There is also that tendency towards self-blame when we experience our wilderness times as punishment, whether from God or just life. “I’m going through this tough stretch because God is punishing me, or because karma is catching up with me”, we think—and again, one can most certainly have wilderness experiences without either being the case, at all. Jesus did.

Why *is* Jesus in the wilderness? The first verse of our lesson gives the answer: “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Ah. Jesus is *led by the Spirit* into the wilderness. He’s not lost. He’s not being punished. But he *is* led by the Spirit there. And in the wilderness, he will be tempted---an equally good translation would be “tested”—by the devil, the one who lies. Does this mean that every time we feel ourselves to be in a kind of wilderness that God has led us there to test us? I would certainly not make that assumption! As far as I know, none of us are the Messiah, the Christ. But, I would also not want us to assume that we’re in a tough place as a punishment or because we’re hopelessly lost. Sometimes wilderness is just where we are at. In a broken world, bad things randomly happen. And it is probably fair to say that however we end up there, we may find that the wilderness has both upsides and perils, blessings and temptations, and that our faith, our *mettle*, will be tested while we are there. Which is not necessarily a bad thing.

For Jesus, this testing, in terms of his life context, comes right after his Baptism in the Jordan River and right before he begins his ministry. This wilderness time helped to set into perspective for Him, Who He was, and what He was about. It helped Him define His mission and His allegiance. He was tested, and not found wanting. And the one who did the testing was the devil.

The devil, then, is the *who* of this Scripture lesson today. What of this devil? What do we know of him? The names applied to the devil are informative. Sometimes, he is called Satan, satanos, which means adversary or enemy. Jesus refers to him this way in the final temptation in our text today. Whose enemy is Satan? God’s enemy, our enemy, Creation’s

enemy. In other places, including much of today's text, he is called the devil, diabolos, from which we get the word "diabolical". Literally, diabolos is one who lies, one who deceives. And to whom does the devil tell lies? To us, of course. Promises of pleasure, glory, relief from effort.....the deceiver whispers those promises in our too often receptive ears. The problem is that the devil is a liar.....it's not true. One of my favorite sayings about the devil plays off the image of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, which we find in our first lesson today. The saying is this: the serpent is always hissing about what's missing. The devil is always hissing about what's missing. The devil always assures us that things are missing in us and in our lives, that we are missing out, that it's not enough, that we're not enough. That's the drama about to be played out here, in the desert wilderness, between Jesus and the devil.

Without going into a detailed examination of each temptation, let's summarize by saying that the devil offers Jesus bread, safety and power. He urges Jesus to turn stones into bread; he tempts Jesus to make sure that angels will protect Him if he's in peril; he offers Jesus all the authority and power in the world. We are also likely tempted by bread, safety and power; we all want to have adequate provisions; we all want to feel safe; we all want to be in control. But, plenty of things tempt us—it could just as well be youth, beauty, and wealth; or confidence, fame, and security. Underlying these and all temptations may be not so much that we are tempted *towards* something, as that we are being tempted *away* from something—not so much that are tempted towards bread, safety and power, as that we are lured *away* from trusting God and our God given identity as God's child. Jesus has just had his identity as God's beloved Son declared in his baptism, but now, when he is hungry, alone, and vulnerable, the one who lies needles him that *that* is not enough. *He* is not enough. He must prove himself, he must be

assured of all power and glory, he must demand protection and security, all before he begins his ministry. Being God's chosen and beloved is not enough....He is not enough. That's what the devil is selling. It's a lie; the devil is a liar. But it's a sweet sounding lie that catches us right where we're vulnerable.

Because like everyone else in the world, don't we fear that we're not enough? That being a beloved and claimed child of God is not enough? That the blessings and gifts God bestows are not enough? In the spirit of Lent, I confess to you right now that this lie grabs me right in the gut. Have I ever done enough? As a Pastor, as a wife, as a Mom, as a friend---have I worked hard enough, loved enough, done enough? And do I have enough? Enough money in my pension? Enough insurance for my health or home? Am I attractive enough, slim enough, athletic enough? Have I used my musical gifts enough? I tell you what....it's *never* enough! How could I know that it is? And *I'm* never enough, either. That's the serpent hissing about what's missing...it doesn't have to be *true*, because the devil is a liar. But it causes us to doubt our Lord, it causes us to doubt ourselves, it causes us to doubt our faith. And I have to believe that this is a common human predicament. Whole industries exist to assuage our insecurity about not having or being enough. *When* is it ever enough? When are *we* ever enough? Taken to extremes, these are despair inducing questions. But here's the answer, which I am plagiarizing in part from David Lose, a premier theologian of our church. Ready? *Created and redeemed by God, you are enough. You are so enough. It is unbelievable how enough you are.*

There's a popular song right now by Christian singer Lauren Daigle that I find so moving and it includes these words as she addresses God:

I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I'm not enough
Every single lie that tells me I will never measure up
Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low?
Remind me once again just who I am, because I need to know (ooh oh)

You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing
You say I am strong when I think I am weak
You say I am held when I am falling short
When I don't belong, oh You say that I am Yours
And I believe, I believe, what You say of me.

These words summarize how Jesus overcomes his time of wilderness temptation and how he successfully passes the test of the devil. Jesus *believes* what God has declared of Him: “You are my beloved, with whom I am pleased.” Jesus trusts that He is enough, that God is enough, that God has made Him enough and blest him enough to withstand times in the wilderness, to withstand times of testing, and to live the life God intends for Him. And maybe that’s what we need to do as well. We need to claim every promise God makes to us, every gift and blessing God bestows, and the identity God declares to us in our Baptism, but also every moment of our lives, as God declares: You are my beloved child and I am glad of you. You are enough. You are so enough. Those are God’s words to us. We just need to believe. Amen.