

Wilderness Days

Deuteronomy 30:11-18; Psalm 40:1-3; Matthew 4:1-11

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This account of the wilderness experience of Jesus is different from any other account in the Gospels. It is different because Jesus was the only one who was present except for the adversary. It occurs straightaway after His baptism by John the Baptizer and immediately after the heavens had been opened to him and he heard the voice of God saying, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

Alone, Jesus is led by God into the desert where he will struggle with his commitment to do all of the will of God for the redemption of humankind. It is at this point that Satan, the adversary, the seducer, the accuser, comes to stir up within Jesus the possibility of not following his mission as God desired him to do. Even Jesus describes what Satan offers as tempting.

Satan says, "Jesus, if you will be my disciple, I promise that you will never lack for anything you desire." You will have all of the luxuries of life; You can use your power to create whatever You need. You will have the awe of everyone; You will be seen as a god who cannot be hurt or harmed. You will have power beyond anything that any other ruler of the world has possessed. Think about it Jesus. I can make this happen for you if you will follow me."

Jesus must have considered his experience of temptation, and struggle, and victory so important for the disciples to hear that he told it to them in detail. It may have been that Jesus knew it was the only way that the disciples would begin to comprehend Who it was that they were following and what the mission of Jesus really was.

The writers of the gospels must have thought the experience important enough, and common enough to the experience of all humans who commit themselves to be followers of Jesus, that they recorded it in their writings for all generations who would come after them.

Temptations are very personal. They are peculiarly suited to our dreams for the future, to our ambitions in life, to our aspirations about what we want to accomplish. The greater a person's potential for service to God in any form and the greater the abilities that person is being called to use, the more powerful may be the temptations to which they seem to be vulnerable.

The temptation of the great writer who can stir minds and hearts with wonderful words may not be the same as that of the scientist with an inventive mind. The temptation of the great athlete may not be the same as that of the accomplished artist. What is seen as life's supreme goal most likely determines what will be that individual's temptation; that thing that would guarantee that the person does not succeed if they yield. For Jesus, the supreme mission was to be a means of God's grace to a world that did not yet really know God.

In the wilderness Jesus struggled with three fundamental questions. Since those of us who seek to be disciples of Jesus are called to pursue his mission, we must necessarily face some of the

same concerns. The wilderness journey of Jesus raises some questions for us as well. It is a necessary starting point for our journey as people who say that we follow Jesus.

Question #1: Can we live by bread alone?

Have you ever been on a diet? Sort of a diet? Trying to diet? And you just feel like your whole body has been turned into a magnet that is drawn to the refrigerator door? Or you're walking through the mall and the aroma of the Cinnabon stand comes out and grabs you and won't turn you loose until you have one of those things in your hand? Anybody know what I'm talking about?

It was likely that after a time of fasting Jesus may have looked at the smooth flat stones in the wilderness and thought about the loaves of bread that his mother Mary used to bake in Nazareth. It is at that point that the tempter comes and urges him to change those stones into bread. The struggle must have been, from the human side of Jesus, that he knew that he could have done just that. Those stones, turned to bread, of course symbolized the possibility of having everything that would satisfy all of the physical needs of Jesus.

But then I think that Jesus had a larger vision of his mission on earth, perhaps in which he would not have seen himself alone as being hungry.

Perhaps he saw the hungry

- people in the Roman Empire;
- one of the children of the future pleading for food in
- Ethiopia, or
- Syria, or
- Afghanistan, or
- one of the untouchables on the streets of Calcutta dying of hunger, or
- families in America going to bed hungry.

The gospel of Jesus is a holistic gospel. Jesus was always concerned, not just for the souls of people, but for their total well-being. If we are to participate with Jesus in doing the gospel, it includes caring for the whole person, because, as Jesus would later teach "just as you do it to one of the least of these...you do it to me. (Matt 25:40)

As Jesus looked at those stones, he must have thought that indeed, the physical bread was necessary for the physical existence of humankind, but more than physical bread is necessary if we are to live abundantly. If we are to experience God's abundant life, we must also have the presence of Jesus, the Bread of Heaven, in our lives.

Question #2: Are we to believe that Jesus is the Messiah without proof?

The tension between faith and doubt is a reality of our humanity. We long for certainty, for some sort of spiritual sensation that will serve as a kind of proof that what we want to believe is real. It's not that we necessarily want to be dazzled by stunts; in fact, that would probably be very off-putting to most of us. But when life is hard we want to be convinced that there is a gracious, kind, loving God who is caring for us.

It was the temptation to demonstrate this kind of proof that the adversary held out to Jesus. "Jesus, if you will fling yourself off of the highest point of the Temple, in the middle of all of the people gathered in Jerusalem, the angels of heaven will bear you up so that you will never hit the ground or harm yourself. Jesus, it would prove to everyone who you really are. Think, Jesus, it would be a way of bringing in the kingdom of God without having to be obedient to the will of God and dying on the cross. Think about it, Jesus. It's a short-cut to realizing your mission. Think of the glory among the people that would be yours."

But the mission of Jesus was not to dazzle people with wonders. It was to show them the loving heart of a God with whom they could have a relationship. And this new relationship that he made possible required trust, based not upon a stunt, but on the nature of God.

Question #3: Can we serve God and serve ourselves?

The adversary held out before Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world – for a price. "Only worship me, Jesus, and I will give all of the kingdoms of the world to you. I will turn the hearts of people to You."

We live in a generation of acquisition. We sometimes repeat the saying, "The one who dies with the most toys wins."

The response of Jesus to the temptation affirmed that heaven's mission can only be accomplished by heaven's methods. The choice is

- between choosing God's leading and choosing our willfulness.
- Between a life of commitment to God or a lifestyle that makes us our own god.

In many ways we aren't so different from those Hebrews that we read about this morning. We are all human beings at the core. God was trying to enable the Hebrews to become a people who would follow Yahweh and not the gods of Egypt. After 40 years they still had difficulty following the God about whom they talked with their voices and that they said they carried in their hearts.

I can only imagine that God must have thought, "What more must I do?" And then Jesus came so that we might have a visible glimpse of who God is and what God is like. And Jesus taught us how to pray for help. Every Sunday together we pray that part of the Lord's Prayer saying, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

God's call to us in every age is that of giving ourselves to God in a relationship that brings about the transformation of our lives, and through us, the lives of others. Oh, there is one more thought that we need to consider: Satan is always a liar.
Amen.