

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2020

Old Testament Lesson

Psalm 32:7-11

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSV)

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.

Jesus, the Wilderness, and Me

Over the last decade, one of my favorite series on television was "**Mad Men**." The title of the hit show is a play on the name for **advertising executives** from those "Go! Go!" days of the 1960's when these folks were called Ad Men. This often was tweaked to describe the wild lifestyle they maintained: Let us say that they **indulged frequently** in many bad habits and in many selfish ways. So, they were known as **Mad Men**. The series on AMC lasted seven seasons and featured a gifted actor, **Jon Hamm**, in the lead role playing a tortured soul named, Don Draper. This character was a successful executive who was creative and talented. He had it all: the job, the wife, the children, and the house. But, he also had many serious faults: He was driven by fear, self-loathing, and **self gratification**. And, he seemed determined to **destroy himself** and everyone who loved or admired him. There were occasional glimpses of decent behavior and some core of goodness deep down, but his **vices and temptation** overwhelmed him at every turn. Curiously, viewers often identified with the character, Don Draper, probably because they saw their own **flaws** in him, despite his portrayal as a constantly despicable character. In relation to our scripture lesson, he is **nothing like Jesus**.

But, I bring this up for another reason. If you watched that show “Mad Men” regularly, you were likely frustrated with the final episode: Because, the long-running series ended with the main character, Don Draper, heading off to **a retreat**, apparently intent on gaining a greater awareness of himself. And, this seemed false and out of place to us who were dedicated followers of the show, because the character, Don Draper, certainly had never been “in touch” with himself, or with anyone else.

Now, I bring this up because we see **Jesus** going on a retreat, of sorts, after his baptism by John. We often focus on the **temptation** narrative, but I want us to address the **deeper issues** that Jesus faced. This is important, because through this narrative we get a close look at the **divinity of Jesus**. This has great value for us in this first Sunday in Lent, because this story also tells us a lot about this truly **human side**, as well. We sometimes have to stop and remind ourselves that **Jesus is fully human** while at the same time being **fully divine**. Of course, this is nothing new to the church. You may recall the words of the **Nicene Creed** from the 3rd century C.E.:

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary-
and became truly human.

So often, we want **Jesus** comfortably **beside us**, sharing our successes and our failures. And, in our Reformed tradition the gift of **the Spirit** from God and Christ accomplishes just that. But, there is a danger in placing Jesus so close at hand (Think of something like Jesus-in-my-pocket.) to pull out at our whim in order to help us in times of danger and personal defeat. Yes, Christ is before us, but ascended into heaven. That is the divine Jesus: all powerful Son of God. But, the writer of *Matthew* gives us a contrast to that **elevated image** of the **Risen Christ**. In these verses, the writer wants us to see this human side of Jesus that **everyone witnessed** during his time on earth. So, nearly every scholar agrees, as you might also, that this is **not a typical story** about Jesus.

Where did this unusual story come from? If we look in *The Gospel of Mark*, there is mention of it, even if it is condensed to two sentences:

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Mark 1:12-13 NRSV

As you can see, the reporting is **sparse and spare** in *Mark*, and you have to go mining to find the **theological underpinnings** for this story. This gets even more complicated because this telling lacks a plot line and the **images of action** that we have in *Luke* and *Matthew*.

Well, somewhere along the line this basic story was expanded into several verses, complete with **dialogue**: All based on a much more brief **original source**. As the reader takes this in, notice that each of these three versions contain the **adversary**: A character which is familiar to us, named **satan**. Only, where did that come from? Is there really a **rival to God**, an embodiment of evil? Why does it appear right here? And, with all of the visions and temptations, regardless of your theology, what are we **to do with it**? I’m not sure that we can address all of this, but here is an attempt.

Let's start by looking at the **narrative**. Jesus has been **baptized by John**, and God has announced that this is **God's Son**. God's Spirit **descended** on Jesus like a dove. That should have convinced everyone present that this Jesus was authentic: the Son of God. And, with further reading Jesus is convinced that he is the **Son of God**. At the baptism and the pronouncement of God, there are witnesses, maybe even a crowd. Amazingly, like our "Mad Men" character, Don Draper, Jesus decided to go on **retreat**. He managed to slip away from everyone and did so this without explanation.

Then, our **mystery guest** shows up. And, it happens pretty abruptly in all three versions. This "opposition" character comes into this story, which makes this **very different** from the other stories in the **New Testament**. You may notice that the major portion of the story is a sequence of **question-and-answer** statements. This type of narrative is similar to the discussions of the *Torah* by **rabbis** from this time. Their writings were recorded in documents, but were not included in our *Bible* nor the Jewish *Torah*. Importantly for us, in this technique of discussion the rabbis often assigned an **opponent to God** and gave the opponent things to say in a discussion, or **argument**, with God. And, the **Hebrew word** for opponent or prosecutor, was used: in Hebrew it is **סוֹתָן** *sa-tán*.

You will have to go to the *Book of Job* to find another example of this. Early in that story, the opposition advisor, or opposing attorney, is in the **heavenly court** of God, serving like a presidential advisor or cabinet member. Soon, there is a discussion on the merits of God's faithful servant **Job**, and the opposing entity, the **satan** (with a small "s"), argues that Job should be **put to the test**. And, weirdly **God agrees**. Most of you know that *Job* is a strange story of bad things happening to **good people**. And, it is more of a **short story** than a writing of a prophet or about wisdom. We had better put this aside for the time being, but you have to admit that *Job* is a very different Bible story.

With this in mind, we find that Jesus was being tested, as well, by his opponent:

- Do you want **food**? Change the **stones** into food!
- Do you want to know the extent of your **personal power**? Invoke God's agency and **save** your human form from certain destruction!
- Do you want **wealth and security** on Earth? Take on these **earthly kingdoms**!

But, notice how Jesus is never hooked by these challenges. The responses all **point to God**, which allows us to consider the act of God, the gift of God's Son, that provides **salvation** for each one of us!

Not surprisingly, Jesus handles it all, and he points us to God and **God's power**. In contrast, you and I are pretty **frail**. We are a lot more like the ever-weak and spiteful Don Draper, the Bad Man/Ad Man of "Mad Men." Few people would mistake our actions and choices with the life and **ministry of Jesus**, the Christ. But, we can certainly work toward improving our responses when difficulties arise. And, we must admit that "bad stuff" happens all the time. That is the advantage of **Lent**: We have an entire season on our church calendar **to look at ourselves** in just this light.

In addition, these verses also provide us with enduring **symbols for the Gospel** story. Of course, we must look at the words that are used. There are **stones and bread**, which hold great significance. The scripture tells us that Jesus is **hungry**. He is fasting and is in the desert for an extended period of time: That's the meaning of **40 days and nights**. This time of want, of hunger and thirst, is now set up against what we already know about **Jesus and God** as the **abundant source of grace and mercy**.

He we get an early hint of what will come in the future of his ministry: the **feeding of the thousands** with just a little bit of starter material in just **a few loaves of bread**. And, we reenact this on a regular basis in the **Eucharist**, the good gift of the Lord's supper. Here at the beginning lies the unfolding of significant events that will come to pass in much later in his ministry. This is what we will find throughout Lent: That these themes appear, and reappear, as the story the Gospel is told week-to-week.

The **stones** are used another way. After Jesus **enters Jerusalem** triumphantly the week of his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, he stood on the temple mount with its stonework and stone paving beneath his feet. In the face of these **reminders** of grandeur and might and wealth, Jesus points out in our lesson that **personal safety** is secondary to **faith**. And, that faith is **in God**, not in the works of humans, or false gods and idols, which this satan represents.

Lastly, the **temptation of power** over earthly kingdoms is presented from the top of a high mountain. Many great events occur on mountains throughout Biblical history, such as Moses receiving the Ten Commandments and the Transfiguration of Jesus. Despite this lofty setting and worldly temptation, Jesus is the **Son of God** and has power that goes beyond political influence or secular kingdoms. As the Risen Christ, **Jesus rules in power with God**. And, through Jesus you and I have a deeper understanding of God which was not available before the life, death, and **resurrection** of Jesus.

But, more significantly this story is here at the beginning of **Lent**, is so that you and I can see **Jesus of Nazareth** raw and "unfiltered." He is both human and divine. **Jesus thirsts** and gets **hungry**. He has a human form and function. You and I readily can **identify** with this. In these verses, Jesus is tested through his **human qualities**, but comes through because of his **divine nature**, something that is far beyond the capabilities of you and me.

Through this scripture lesson, we can **place ourselves** with Jesus in **the wilderness**. After all, you and I get thirsty, and we get hungry. We look for **safety** and nearly always make choices that **protect ourselves** instead of others. Most of the time, you and I are not looking with a long view. But, this story helps us realize that that long view of our faith and our journey is just what we need for **effective ministry** and for a deeper **relationship with God**.

Every day, you and I have choices to make. Many times we have something like a **wilderness experience** due to events that are, truly, beyond our control. In addition, we are placed into a **culture** that does not agree with many of **our beliefs** and can even **ridicule us** when we act on those beliefs. For example, many of us **tithe** our income. It took me a long time to get to that point, but I do it gladly, and I have done so for quite a long time. I regard this as a blessing and a vital part of my faith and its expression. But, each year my accountant and financial advisor caution me on this and rightly so. I understand their concern: That is their responsibility to me as their client.

But, in **tithing**, I am acting in faith through what I believe God would have me do: I am **sharing what I have** with others. This essential aspect of stewardship and **discipleship** frees me and my family in many other ways, as well. We create **priorities** for our time, talent, and resources: Most importantly, that **starts with God**. In addition, this creates a form of **budgeting** that informs me in **practical ways**: We know exactly what we owe and to whom we owe it, and we live **within our means**, which removes anxiety and external pressures over **material matters** and keeps them all **in perspective** for us.

Like many of you, I am **giving**, not out of a sense of reward, but because I am **thankful** for what I have. **God is active** in our lives, allowing us to engage the world in **a new way**. And, that includes **fully sharing** our resources and our time: literally, **all that we have**.

Living in this way, you and I potentially can develop an overwhelming sense of **serving others**. In this giving of ourselves, we come to **worship** and join in **prayer** and engage in the **study of scripture**. Through our life **in Christ**, we are looking out into the world in a different way that no longer centers on ourselves and our well-being, but on **our call from God**: to work for God's kingdom. And, this genuine change in us is **seen by others**, and over time **they are changed**, as well. Throughout the church, this is known as **witnessing**: one of the most powerful aspects of **living** in Christ. With God and through Christ, we can take the longer view on issues such as **education, hunger, poverty, and education**. We can choose to do the right thing, even when it creates difficulty or even, like Jesus, **hardship** for us.

At nearly any time, we can describe a **wilderness** all around us; but, this example of Jesus **informs us** that even the greatest temptation can be **overcome** through the **power of God**. And, with our life **in Christ**, we are able to focus upon **goodness and love** and serving the greater good for **God's kingdom**. Like Jesus in the wilderness, **our trust** is in God and in **God's Spirit** to lead us- **every step of the way!**

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