

Into The Wilderness
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
January 16, 2022 – PM Service
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Matthew 4:1-11

Our passage tonight begins on the heels of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River – heaven was opened, the Spirit of God descends, and God's words ring out: "This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased." What should follow such a momentous event? In today's world it could be a multi-course dinner at someone's home or an upscale restaurant, or perhaps a celebrative picnic at a neighborhood park under tall, lofty trees and blue skies. In the days of Jesus, perhaps it would be something more like the story of the prodigal son – "Bring a fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate." None of these, however, could be farther from today's text. Following his baptism, Jesus is sent into the wilderness, and he is sent by God, by the Spirit, to be tested by Satan.

While in this Judean desert, Jesus spends 40 days and 40 nights fasting. There he is -- sitting on a rock, weary and worn, his stomach rolling and rumbling from hunger pains, and here comes the father of all lies, the great deceiver himself, Satan.

You can almost hear a hiss in his voice – perhaps reminiscent of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Satan speaks to Jesus' mind – perhaps in some type of dream: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." In other words, use your miraculous powers, Jesus, to end your discomfort, to bring an end to your hunger. You're capable of that, aren't you?

The scene changes for the second temptation as Satan takes Jesus to Jerusalem, to the highest point of the temple. One commentator, Dale Bruner, says while the first temptation smelled like a bakery, the second one has the aroma of an orthodox liturgy, filled with holy things – the holy city, the holy temple, and the reading of the Holy Scriptures. Satan says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." In other words, jump off the temple, Jesus. Your Father loves you; he will save you, won't he?

The devil then goes on to quote from Psalm 91 (verses 11-12) about how God will command his angels to take hold of you, so that you do not strike your foot against a stone. Or perhaps we could rephrase it to say, "so that you will not crash your body on the ground." Can you hear Satan's shrewd ways? "Come on, Jesus, show me a miracle where your Father comes and rescues you from your leap off the temple." Jesus experiences not only the temptation, but also one of the evils in the world, the perverse use of scripture. Psalm 91 does speak powerfully of God's protection for his people, but that protection is because he loves us, not so we can put his power to the test.

Higher and higher we go as we turn our attention to temptation number three. Satan takes Jesus to a *very* high mountain – one that is exceedingly beyond reality -- and has him gaze upon on *all* the kingdoms of the world. "I will give you all these kingdoms – everything, all the territory," Satan says, "if you bow down and worship me." What Satan wants Jesus to do is to give allegiance to *him* rather than to his Father.

The Greek verbs for *bow* and *worship* are aorist, a form suggesting only a single act is needed to complete Satan's request (not ongoing, repeated action). However, what Satan wants from Jesus is still demanding. "Fall down," he says. "Throw yourself to the ground before me." He demands a sign of devotion, much like one would do before a high-ranking person or a divine being. After 40 days in this wilderness experience, Jesus is being tempted to break his relationship with his father by giving in to Satan's demands.

The wilderness experience, of course, is not unique to Jesus. I think, for example, of a friend of mine who passed away in 2014. I first met her when I was a student at Hope College and working in the archives there on campus, where she was volunteering during her retirement years. Her husband had passed away in his mid-40's from heart disease, so she had been a widow for a long time, but with a strong faith in Christ, she gradually pressed on in life. I knew her as a person faithful in her church – attending worship services both morning and evening, participating in Bible studies, and serving on various committees. The spiritual conversations I had with her are moments I still cherish to this day.

As health concerns mounted – glaucoma gradually reducing her eyesight and COPD making it more difficult to breath – life became more lonely, more of a wilderness experience. While she was frustrated by her diminished health, what bothered her more – what tempted her to question God's plan and his power -- was the fact that her four sons had all walked away from the faith.

I can still remember, during a visit at her home, the sadness in her voice as she questioned why, why God would allow this when it was not how she had raised her children. And as the end of her life drew closer, she had more time to think by herself, more time to fear that she would not see her sons again in heaven.

If I were to ask you, pre-pandemic, if you had ever experienced a time of wilderness in your life, many of you would likely answer yes. However, if I were to ask that question now, most everyone – if we're honest -- would need to admit to having a wilderness experience in the past few years. We have all experienced times of loneliness and isolation, times of being cut off from others. Think of school children who were trying learn from home and being away from their friends, people in care facilities who were navigating window visits with loved ones, grandparents missing hugs from their grandchildren.

The Greek word in our text for wilderness is *eremos*. It means solitary, lonely, desolate, or uninhabited. It can also give the idea of being deserted by others or deprived of aid and protection, especially from friends, family, or other acquaintances. All of us has probably experienced *eremos* in our lives.

While Satan can attack us at different times, he often takes his best shot when we are weary and worn, when we are isolated and alone, and when we are separated from the support we receive from our church, our family, and our friends. The devil wants to come between us and our loving Father. He operates with deceptive words, suggestions, and arguments, by placing ideas and thoughts into our minds that will build a wall between us and God.

From our text, we know that Satan also used his sly and crafty ways with Jesus. When Satan tempts him to turn stones into bread, Jesus has the words from Deuteronomy 8 on his lips: "...man does not live on bread alone, Satan, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." The devil is rebuffed, but, of course, he doesn't give up so easily. He picks up Jesus' response to the first temptation – living on the words of the Lord -- and then uses the words of the Lord when he tells Jesus to fling himself off the highest point of the temple, to see if God will rescue him from death. The Spirit then provides Jesus with the words of Deuteronomy 6:16, and he tells Satan: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Strike two for Satan, but he tries still one more time. Jesus, though, has had enough of him -- "Away from me, Satan!" -- and he again quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, this time from chapter 6, verse 13: "Fear the Lord your God, and serve *him only*..." Jesus' relationship with his Father is preserved, and Satan slithers out of the scene.

Notice that these temptations do not occur *during* the forty days spent in the wilderness; they occur at the end -- "*After* fasting forty days and forty nights..." verse 2 tell us. So we might ask, "What was Jesus doing during those forty days while alone in this solitary, desolate place? How did he spend these days of fasting?"

Scripture doesn't tell us for sure, but it seems reasonable to consider two things. First, Jesus spent time savoring God's presence, being filled with the Spirit, and thinking about the incredible relationship he has with his Father. *Eremos* experiences – times in the wilderness -- are often times when we are drawn closer to God. Think of the words that he proclaimed at Jesus' baptism, just before this event. What a beautiful message of affirmation to let play repeatedly in your mind during wilderness times-- that you are God's child, that he loves you, and that he is pleased with you.

Jesus was also likely meditating on God's Word – especially the words from Deuteronomy -- rehearsing the truths of scripture again and again, letting them penetrate into his heart and into his soul. It's ironic that Deuteronomy 16:6-7, just a few verses prior to words Jesus uses, records the words of Moses that remind us that God's commandments are to be on our hearts, to be impressed on our children, and to be talked about wherever we go. Jesus was likely living out the way he was raised, including the habit of regularly meditating on God's Word.

Author and pastor, Aaron Damiani, summarizes it this way: Jesus entered the wilderness with his father's baptismal endorsement ringing in his ears. His forty days gave him space to bask in his father's love and to draw upon the Spirit's power. When the devil tempted him with fantasies of dazzling self-love and godless power, Jesus was ready. He shut down the demonic power with the Word of God, which lived inside of him (*The Good of Giving Up: Discovering the Freedom of Lent*, 26).

Now some might argue that this victory over Satan was easy for Jesus -- after all, he's God. The good news for us, though, is that when Satan comes knocking on the door of *our* hearts – with those deceptive words, thoughts, or ideas – we can use the same strategy that Jesus uses – one that I witnessed in my classroom at school.

A student of mine struggled with anxiety. Tears and breathing difficulties came when he was fearful, even though he often could not name the fear. One day he came to me with a piece of paper in his hand and asked if he could read it to himself every so often. I looked down and saw words written in his own handwriting: "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed because I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10). He went back to his desk with the assurance, that, yes, it was okay to read those words to himself.

Friends, we, too, need to let God's Spirit guide us in his Word -- to let the words of scripture sink deep into our soul, so that when Satan comes, we will be able to stand against him. Let me give you just a few examples in addition to the passages that Jesus uses from Deuteronomy.

When the devil tries to weaken our faith by leading us to believe that God cannot possibly hear and answer our prayers, especially when our requests seem big and bold, we can respond with words from Psalm 86:10, words that I mentioned in a previous message: "God, you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God."

When Satan tempts us to engage in sexual activity that is outside our Father's will, we can use the words that God provides from 1 Corinthians 6, and say, "My body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. I am not my own. I have been bought with a price. Therefore, I will honor God with my body."

And when we need a verse that works for every temptation we may face, we can boldly say the same words that Jesus said when he had had enough of the devil's crafty schemes -- "Away from me, Satan" -- words that we find in verse 10 of our text.

Defeating the evil one's temptations by reciting short passages of scripture -- saying them out loud -- is a powerful tool that God gives us, for his word, Hebrews tell us, is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). Dale Vander Veen, a retired CRC pastor, addressed the topic of God's Word in a devotional book he wrote: "Anything that sharp," he said, "I must handle with care, but I must handle it, or I will not be able to handle temptation" (*Dear Friends -- Seeing Our Best Friend in His Word and World*, 2011).

Jesus' example of reciting scripture offers us great hope, but he also gives us one other activity that we can put into practice, and that is regularly spending time in God's presence so that he can remind us of his love and fill us with his Spirit. That may be in daily devotions, weekly worship, regular small groups, or an occasional retreat away from the busyness of life. God needs to speak to us on a regular basis, but that also means giving him the opportunity to do so.

I don't think I need to convince any of you tonight that Satan is still on the loose, slithering in and out of our lives, seeking to separate us from the Father. However, we need to remember that God is faithful, and that he gives us the power to overcome temptation and to be victorious. May he fill us with his Spirit as we spend time in his presence, and may he give us the desire to have his Word live deep within our hearts, so that when Satan comes lurking, we, by God's grace, will be ready. Amen.

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