

Wilderness of Temptation

Genesis 3: 1-13 Luke 4: 1-13

Throughout Christian history, the wilderness has been a destination for those seeking spiritual renewal and growth. In today's scriptures, we have the dramatic account in Luke of Jesus in the wilderness following his baptism. As Christianity grew in popularity in its early centuries, Christian believers concerned about their spirituality would retreat from the worldly cosmopolitan centers where Christianity flourished. They'd head into the desert seeking solitude, leaving behind distractions, people, and material comforts so that they could be at peace and seek a more mystical experience of spiritual life with total devotion.

First, spiritual teachers retreated into the wilderness. But then came the students, the disciples, and others who would come and seek them out. Then the sages would move further out, and their students would become teachers, and more would come out from the cities seeking them.

The movement into the desert wilderness became more pronounced when Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and the church became a totally mainstream institution. As the church became more formal and bureaucratic, the stream of spiritual seekers increased to the point that theologian Athanasius of Alexandria declared that "the desert had become a city."

In solitude, and practicing rather extreme forms of withdrawal, disdaining anything that would bring material comfort or bodily satisfaction, committed believers pushed themselves to the extreme. They believed they would root out the sinfulness within and around them, achieving a type of spiritual purity. The course of their regimen would reveal to them personal demons and evil spirits which they would have to confront and defeat in order to attain the level of spiritual purity that they sought.

Milder forms of such retreat and self-discipline have lived on in various ways and among different groups, from monastic orders to Pietists like Amish/Mennonite sects. The notion of Lent, having begun last Wednesday – Ash Wednesday, comes from a similar sense of spiritual renewal through devotion and self-discipline. Lent is a season of spiritual preparation that continues until the time before Easter. It is traditionally marked by certain acts of new or renewed self-discipline, abstaining from certain pleasures, participating in particular acts of devotion, and adopting other practices.

In Lent, we can see that a wilderness retreat is not exactly necessary for spiritual renewal and growth. What is shared is the nature of temptation, and that can form its own wilderness environment. While the extremism of desert sages and their disciples aimed to expose and overcome temptation by deprivation, Lenten disciplines in the course of our daily lives can be highly effective at the same objectives of exposing and overcoming temptation.

The first instance of temptation recorded in scripture comes not in the desert wilderness, but in Genesis 3 in the presumably lush paradise of the Garden of Eden. The first story of the newly created human beings in the Garden of Eden is about obedience to the will of God. When we're confronted with a choice, it's whether to do what God wants done, or do what seems preferable to us. Here we find a dilemma that regularly confronts all people of faith.

No sooner is the couple found in the Garden of Eden than the woman encounters the serpent. The serpent proceeds to deftly steer the innocent woman to seize and consume what was explicitly forbidden by God. Once caught, finger pointing ensues as man blames woman, woman blames serpent, and God says you all stink with sinfulness.

Let's back up a moment. What tempts Eve? The narrator tells us what she was thinking. Bear in mind that all she knew was what God had told her, that she was to **not** eat the fruit of that tree. The serpent explains to her the power of that fruit, that by eating it, her eyes would be opened and she would become like God, knowing good and evil. The serpent has opened the door to thinking about this with an alternative perspective. The serpent has provided new information. Eve decides to consider everything anew. In a perfectly rational course of thought, she considers that the fruit was good for food, it looked really good, and now she knew that it offered the wisdom of God. These are her justifications. Now it makes perfect sense to her, and to anyone else. Most of **us** are probably rooting for Eve to go ahead and take the fruit! Sure! What could go wrong?

Note how there is no mention of any consequences sanctioning her action. And that's the nature of justifying; it's quite conveniently one-sided.

Had Eve opted to reflect on the other side of the argument, she might have been more reluctant. God did say **not** to eat it. God has provided all good things. God's counsel has never come up short. God is fair and generous. And consider the source of your latest information, sweetheart: a serpent? Really? But Eve didn't allow **other** such reasoned thoughts to enter her consideration because she really just wanted excuses to validate doing what she wanted to do anyway. Her spirit embraced the sin **long** before she committed the act. It's that weak spirit that the desert spiritualists sought to identify and root out. While the Garden of Eden was no wilderness, the choice posed to Eve drew her into a wilderness, a spiritual wilderness.

What is temptation? It's a spiritual surrender to a particular weakness – whatever it may be – that entices us to depart from what we know is good, true, and righteous. Everyone has weaknesses, but it's the responsibility of the faithful to be **aware** of their weaknesses so that there's a ready spirit for righteousness when the time of temptation comes, when the wilderness of temptation draws us in, confusing, distracting, and getting us lost in spiritual confusion. The weakness that we all must face as Christians depends on the strength of the spiritual foundation that keeps us faithful to God, or not.

It's that spiritual foundation that provides us with signposts in an otherwise spiritual wasteland. Take away the signposts, and you find yourself in a self-made wilderness. With the signposts gone, we become amazingly selective in choosing the information we **want** in order to justify our choice. We can define a self-serving map that takes us to a destination **contrary** to where God wants us to be.

One of the temptations that Eve reveals is to possess the power which God alone has. In seeking such power, one must deny the existence of God and therefore make it fitting that **you** should occupy that place yourself. From this denial, we assume a status where we can come up with our justifications that make our sinful overreach seem natural and just. Further, we can fill the void left by a God who is conveniently no longer present. As long as we deny God's existence and presence, we can justify almost anything as we take God's place.

In the season of Lent, we are not only coming before God in humility, confessing our sinfulness and seeking set ourselves aright, we're also situating God in the center of our lives where God belongs, not on the periphery, not out of the picture. When God is centered where God should be in our lives, we're less prone to presuming God acts on our behalf, or that God doesn't mind when we re-write the rules in our favor, or that God doesn't exist at all. Lent is the period when we assess our spiritual foundations, our compass settings with God. Are we in a right relationship and aware of our dependence on God? Or are we trying to be independent of God and God's way to life? Let's be honest; it's certainly a challenge in our spiritual discipline.

In the passage of Jesus' temptation in Luke (paralleled in Matthew), the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the desert, apparently to experience the testing of his spiritual discipline, and to strengthen it. For the duration of the forty days according to Luke, Jesus was tempted by the devil.

We can find parallels to the foundational story of Judaism in the Exodus where the people of God experience the desert wilderness and face temptation in learning to trust the providence and grace of God. The forty days for Jesus here recalls the forty years in the wilderness following the Exodus. Of course, Lent's forty days corresponds to Jesus' forty day period in the wilderness.

While the devil may have been working on Jesus the whole time, Luke brings us to a climactic scene at what seems to be the end of the forty days.

Jesus is hungry. The first temptation sets Jesus' physical needs against his spiritual commitment. During his sojourn, as his physical needs became **secondary** to his spiritual commitment, he was spiritually prepared for this challenge. He denies the option to turn stones into bread as spiritual strength overcomes physical need. Note also the temptation to react impulsively; Jesus makes a measured response. He understands the result of what surrender to an impulse – even for a moment, even for good reason – would mean for his standing and commitment to God alone. He casts aside the material and physical desires, saying, *The mortal does not live by bread alone, but on every*

word that comes from the mouth of God. On the other hand, we here today have an eager desire for Pastor Bruce to finish up so we can get to the Brunch Pot Luck.

Having God at the center, the firm foundation of his faith, Jesus is able to turn aside the pressing physical need, forming it into spiritual strength. He transforms the lack of food into an awareness of the faithful providence of God, choosing faith in God over the temptation to replace God.

The second temptation targets Jesus' pride, but in particular his pride of faith in God. Tricky! The devil is saying, "Show me your faith." Tempting Jesus to take a literal "leap of faith" and trust in the salvation of his God gets seen by Jesus for what it is, an appeal to manipulate God, as if God serves him and his desires.

The tempter even quotes scripture to Jesus, giving the authority of God's own word as justification for this act. Surely the faithful Jesus, the faithful believer, is persuaded that this act has *biblical authority*. Rather it's a corruption of biblical understanding since scripture is meant to guide, challenge, and offer counsel. Even scripture **hardly begins** to comprehend the whole mind of God.

This temptation is about testing God and God's faithfulness to us, rather than admitting we're the ones whose faithfulness deserves to be tested by God.

The third temptation would give Jesus all the wealth, power and authority *in all the world* in exchange for faithful devotion to the devil. We may be tempted to think, 'I could be the hero, the savior who fulfills God's very will for his creation.' That would make perfect sense if God somehow needed *our* help with accomplishing God's purpose, as if God wasn't really God, but we could take God's place.

Trusting in oneself in this way always comes at the expense of our faithfulness to God. The temptation is great to replace God and God's will with our own will. For the faithful, God must be professed as Sovereign Lord of all creation and its destiny.

So, Jesus will not take this offer, being unwilling to sell out his spiritual commitment to God for the tempting prize of the tempter.

The faithful decision is the result of spiritual strength and integrity that arises from focused, intentional training, not from casual engagement, routine observances, or a life without challenges, including failures. That disciplined, focused spirit is either grown in strength long before the moment of temptation, or else our spirit sinks like a stone amid just a slim period of inconsistency.

May we use this Lenten season of reflection and repentance to re-establish our foundation, sharpen our faithfulness, and tone our discipline so that our spirit and our service is indelibly bound to God and God alone, and not to ourselves, or to the many varieties of temptation that would lure us into paths away from what is faithful and true.