

Luke 4: 1-11
Mark 13: 35-37

Well, we're back in the wilderness again.

I know, I know. We were just there. Back in September, I preached about temptation and the wilderness. Last Lent, we talked about wilderness for weeks and weeks. The year before that, the same.

To be honest, I didn't even want to go there again this year. Sometimes, quite frankly, I get so sick and tired of how we Christians have to be in the wilderness, over and over, every year. I get so worn out by how we humans, how I, have to live there so often.

But even Jesus can't avoid it. So here we go, back into that spot that Walter Bruggemann talks about as the place of no visible means of support, that place where there is no way out, where you can't find your place in the world, or yourself, or what you are supposed to do or who you are supposed to be. We're in the wilderness one more time, where you're stuck in a career you hate, or a marriage that isn't working, or with kids who don't listen to a word you say, or with the nagging feeling you're meant to be doing something other than what you're doing, or you think if only you could be different than you are, but you don't know how to make things better, you don't know how to make things different, every way you turn is just confusing. The wilderness.

As much as we hate it, it's the place where we're stuck.

But wait a second.... If that's true, and the wilderness is the place where you get stuck in your life, then are we saying that Jesus got stuck? Apparently, he did. Here he is, at the beginning of his ministry with the whole world ahead of him - "full of the Holy Spirit" the text says - and maybe he doesn't even realize where the future is going to lead, I don't know - and he's just had this incredible experience of being baptized and made new, given a new lease on things and a new optimism and sure enough.... now he's stuck in the wilderness and can't just get out quick, but instead has to spend all these days and nights where north and south and east and west have vanished and you can turn in circles and everything looks the same - and you think, how the heck can I get out of this place I'm at, I don't even see an exit sign. The exit sign is burnt out - the wilderness is a lot like Marion Hall that way.

And his only companion - maybe the only hope to get out of this confusion - is the other guy who shows up, the Devil. Satan.

We don't talk about Satan much here, and with good reason. But even this character has something to teach us I think. And to do that, let's look more closely at the story that begins Lent. I mean, if we've got to return the wilderness and this wilderness story one more time, we might as well take some time with the guy we don't talk much about, the Devil himself.

First, just in the story, what do we know about Satan? Well, one, he's a great biblical scholar. He can quote scripture with the best of them, and at every turn in this story, he's spouting the appropriate scripture from several different books of the Hebrew Bible.

Let this be a lesson to you. Just because a person can quote scripture when they're telling you what to do, doesn't mean they're Godly. For all we know, there are preachers who have more in common with Satan than God!

The second thing we can see is that Satan is a shrew analyst of political reality. In the temptation of Jesus, he has concisely identified the three main problems of Israel in Jesus time: that people are poor and hungry, that the political leadership is corrupt, and that the leadership of the Temple in Jerusalem is collaborating with the corrupt leadership.

He's right. It's as if the Devil is the head of a think tank, or a noted professor at a university.

So let's see, Satan could be preacher who also teaches at the university – Hey wait, this is going in a direction I didn't plan!

Seriously, you look at the things that Satan offers Jesus, and you see how astute it is.

There, at that time, poverty and hunger are at an all time high. And people live in fear of the oppressive rulership of the Romans. Meanwhile, the Temple, which should be a voice of the oppressed, finds its leadership in cahoots with the powers that be, nuzzling up to

the Roman authorities and getting rich in the process. So Satan puts his finger on it all, and one by one, offers Jesus a chance to change each and every thing that is wrong with the world right then and there.

You want to get rid of poverty and hunger? Do it.

You want to change the rulers of this land? Here it is. Snap your fingers.

You want to lead the Temple? It's at your disposal. Just say 'yes'.

So what is the problem? And why is this a wilderness? It seems, when you look at it, to be a perfect place, a place where you can really make a difference, where you can affect real political and social and economic change. Why not say 'yes'? Which of us wouldn't say 'yes'?

And don't give me the "Well, he'd be eternally punished" or "Satan can't be trusted to follow though." The second one isn't even implied in the scripture, and the as for the first – wouldn't you risk eternal punishment to be the one responsible for feeding the hungry in the world?

Leave aside why is this the wilderness - why is this even temptation?

There must be a reason; stories that are powerful, like this one, and lasting, like this one, are so because they touch something in us, and we keep coming back to them, time and time again, twice in one year sometimes. Because there is a reason.

And I think it has to do with what's deep inside of Jesus. And deep inside of you and me.

I once had a friend who worked as an office manager for a minister. This minister, you would know their name, they are known far and wide for their social action ministry. They help feed the hungry and give the down and out opportunities that no one else offers.

And yet, working for the church for a year, my friend saw close up, behind the scenes. They saw a pastor who loved power. They witnessed how they could treat staff members with little regard for their time or little care for their gifts. They saw how the pastor loved to be noticed, loved to court the rich and powerful, loved to have the best parking place (and would be incensed beyond reason if someone parked in their space by mistake). My friend worked for, quite simply, regardless of all the good their church and they did, a boss with a huge ego and a certain insensitivity to those who worked under them.

And no, it's not Kelley.

I often wonder if that's not true more often than not. That if we met the men and women who are in the corridors of power, who are interested in doing good and extending food

to the hungry and protecting freedoms, whether we wouldn't often be disappointed in them as people. Their supporters would surely answer, "Well, it often takes a big ego to do big things," or "if they didn't have a supreme belief in their own rightness, they wouldn't be able to affect social change."

But these arguments always make me uncomfortable. And I would like to think they made Jesus uncomfortable as well. He surely knew, early on, his persuasive power. He was around 30 by this time, and you know by that point, he knew how he could get people to follow him, to believe in his power and to do what he asked.

That's why I think, while it makes a good story to have the devil be outside of him, the truth is, I think the devil was that voice inside of him, saying, "Don't you see how easy it is? You have power. You could simply be the one who does it all – you could be the one who feeds the poor. You could be the new political force for good. You could be the real High Priest. You have the power to be admired, to be the one, to be important and loved and adored and yes, even worshiped. You can have it all."

So why doesn't he say "yes"?

But he doesn't. Instead, he says "No," and "no" and "no" again. Because there must have been something inside of him that knew that saying "yes" was a cheat. That saying "yes" was a dead end, and wouldn't work at all.

It wasn't because each of the goals weren't noble. They were, they are. And by the way, if you read the rest of Luke, you see he does them all to one degree or another: he feeds the poor, he challenges Rome and he challenges the Temple. But not by just setting out to do it. No --- there's a reason he said "No," as if something else had to be done first. Before he could do those things. As if something had to be in place before ministry really began.

We all, I dare say, want to change things. We may want to change the world. We may just want to change our personality. We may want to leave a lasting imprint on this world of ours, we probably all want people to know we were here, and that we mattered. I am sure we all want to be loved, or at the very least, noticed. Jesus gets offered all of these, and he says, the story says,

That's not reason enough to do them. There has to be more.

Because it can be done. Satan is right. You can change your job. You can change your relationships. You can change your temperament and you can change your future. If you want to do it badly enough, you can do it. You might even change the world, you could do so much that you might even be loved for it.

And yet, again, the story says that's not enough.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

"the wilderness--.... I have an idea that every one of us has already been there. Maybe it just looked like a hospital waiting room to you, or the

sheets on a cheap motel bed after you got kicked out of your house, or maybe it looked like the parking lot where you couldn't find your car on the day you lost your job. It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your own chest, where you begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own breath.

Wildernesses come in so many shapes and sizes that the only way you can really tell you are in one is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life and come up empty. No food. No earthly power. No special protection--just a Bible-quoting devil and a whole bunch of sand.

Needless to say, this is not a situation many of us seek. Most of us, in fact, spend a lot of time and money trying to stay out of it; but I don't know anyone who succeeds at that entirely or forever. Sooner or later, every one of us will get to take our own wilderness exam, our own trip to the desert to discover who we really are and what our lives are really about."

I think she's right. You look around in your life in the wilderness times, and we all have our bag of tricks, the things that usually get out of our problems. Maybe we have a gift of gab, a sense of humor, the power to persuade, the power to make others follow us, a big bank account, infinite charm, someone who stands beside us. And we find that none of these work. Not a one of them will do what we need them to do.

Then what?

Then you are face to face with yourself, and you realize, like Jesus, that there's got to be more to it than this.

So what's the more?

This is what Barbara Crawthorn Crafton wrote about her wilderness, and the wilderness of her friends:

(here I read a meditation written concerning how we – through our overachieving personas and our relentless motion have made ourselves less than happy – it is found in the book “Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter”)

Jesus could have been the overachiever. He could have gotten the CEO job, could have been the top salesperson, could have won the Nobel prize and headed the biggest church in America. He could have fed the world, changed governments and in the middle of it all....

Lost everything.

But it was tempting. It is tempting. Everything you are told, every promise whispered in your ear from the time you are young until now, every time you turn on the tv or talk to your co-workers or hear a success story, says “If you just go for it, and do this for yourself, you can be noticed, and admired, and lusted for by everyone.” Tiger Woods heard that whisper, so do I, so do you.

In the story, it's the Devil whispering. In real life, it's probably just you talking to yourself.

But Jesus said “No.”

And then he went out, and said instead, “I do this not for me, but for you”

“I do this, because it is for God’s ongoing kingdom, and I am just another in a long line of workers in the vineyard.”

“I do this, not for adoration, or for credit, or for money, or for success, or to be number one or to hobnob with power brokers or to even soak in the adoring looks from the hungry people I fed.”

I did it because it was what I was called to do it.

That was why he said “no.”

That was when the exit sign lit up. When he could see what was east, west, north, south, up and down. Then he could see himself, and then the wilderness was over for awhile.

It is a good story. I guess you can never tell it enough after all.