

A Sunday school teacher saw a 6 year old drawing a picture, that looked something Fred Flintstone and Barney in Pre-Historic Bedrock, but also like Thelma and Louise in a convertible in the Grand Canyon. The Teacher asked her to explain it and she said "It's the Holy Spirit Driving Jesus into the Wilderness!"

Jesus' Temptation is recorded in detail only in Matthew and Luke. "Mark says that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days. Satan tempted him, Wild beasts kept him company, and Angels waited upon him. 2 Sentences! John does not mention the experience.

For a Prophet to go into the Wilderness is not a strange behavior, Moses, Elijah, Elisha each went to the Wilderness to seek God...But following his Baptism, Jesus did not "Go to the Wilderness seeking God", instead he was driven into the Wilderness by the Holy Spirit to encounter the devil. I love that image, of this Heaven-descended Dove which came down as a sign of God's love, with God's blessing "Thou art my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased..." and suddenly like something from Alfred Hitchcock this bird begins pestering and pushing Jesus to leave, driving him into the desert! But what this sets up is 40 days and 40 nights, during which Jesus has "A Dark-Night of the Soul", where he struggles with life and death, inflicted by the Holy Spirit of God. This description of Jesus is our fear named in our Lord's Prayer of "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil".

Over the millennia, we have described this as Jesus' Temptation, but Jesus responses come so quickly, so reinforced by Scripture, there does not appear to be any real temptation here. It is the old creedal formula of "He who was sinless being made to sin". The Savior sent by God, Immanuel was never going to sin. Instead, what does happen here is a human matter for the 2nd Adam, whether Jesus will TRUST GOD completely.

In the Garden of Eden, God had told the Adam, that "They could eat of any tree in the Garden except two: The Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Everlasting Life"; because as Eve reports, "On that day, you shall surely die." We start here, because the serpent twists the words, convincing them that they will NOT DIE. Yet, when their trust with God was broken; when they chose to do the one thing God had said not to do, they broke their relationship. And what is DEATH, but the cut-off of all relationship, the breaking of bonds?

The Temptation of Adam and Eve had virtually nothing to do (on their part) with the Power Grab described by the serpent: TO BECOME LIKE GOD; and almost everything to do with human distrust, fear, insecurity. The serpent distorts the command of God, playing upon the fears and insecurity of Adam and Eve. God has not told you everything about the forbidden fruit, about life and death, so what has God not yet told you? Genesis 3 is a story of seduction based on distrust, that leads to fear and dissolution of relationship between Humanity and God, then between the humans where one blames the other, finally between People and CREATION.

Returning to the Gospel passage, Jesus has different specific temptations, just as there are for each of us, surrounding the same dynamic of "distrust". You may grow hungry...there may not be enough...That population are not really HUMAN so they do not count... how do you know God can be trustworthy? As a child in Sunday School, we did have Bible Drills, where you stood at attention with the Bible on your shoulder like a weapon, and at a given command you were to find a passage. But I did not go to Seminaries that taught you to memorize Verses so as to have answers from Scripture; I went to Seminaries that taught you to think about the issues of Scripture and Today so as to raise questions. There can be value in both, but what Jesus does, is to find in Scripture words that give voice to His trust in God. His replies display absolute trust in – dependence upon – God, for Jesus' Calling, his Identity, and his Future.

There is a critical link between Temptation and Trust. To the degree that we trust God for our daily needs, for our purpose and identity as “children of God”, the temptations of the world have little appeal. However, the degree to which we allow our insecurities, worry and doubt to lead us to distrust, we are open to the possibility, the appeals, the temptation that everything is UP TO US ALONE. That possibly God is not able to provide, or does not care about us, so we better take matters into our own hands. To quote the film “Jurassic Park” or the Soviet assumption regarding Ukraine: “You never questioned that just because you had the power to do something, whether you should!”

Rather than focusing upon the challenges put to Jesus, because we each have our own temptations, this morning I would suggest that we think **about the place** where our testing takes place. For Adam and Eve it was The Garden, for Jesus “The Wilderness”, according to John it would be in the Garden again before Jesus’ arrest when he prayed “May this cup pass from me, not according to my will but Thy will”. I believe each of us have our own wilderness. Maybe it looks like the Hospital Waiting Room, hoping against hope that the chemo that makes you sick and kills cells, is winning. Maybe it is the Waiting Room, waiting while your partner sees their doctor or therapist. Maybe the wilderness is the cheap motel after you have been kicked out of your house. Maybe it looked like the parking lot where you could not find your car after your job was taken away. It may even be a kind of desert in your own chest, where you begged for a word from God, hearing nothing over the wheezing bellows of your own breath.

Wilderness comes in so many different shapes and sizes, that the only way you can tell you are in the Wild, is to look around for what you regularly count on to save your life, and come up empty. No food. No special power. No special protection. Just a Scripture-versed Satan and a deserted beach without ocean. Not a place any of us would seek, in fact many spend a great deal on doctors and therapists to keep them out of this, but no one has ever succeeded entirely, not forever.

Ultimately, each of us have a journey through the wilderness, in search of who we really are and what matters to us. That sounds like a Condemnation, but I do not think it is; it is actually Good News, because though no one wants to go there, and those of us who have been lost in the wilderness never want to visit it again soon, the wilderness is one of the most spirit-filled, reality-based, life-changing places of integrity, a person can ever be.

Take Jesus for an example, What did that 6 week famishing stretch in the wilderness do for him? It freed him from all evil attempts to distract him from his purpose, from his faith, from hunger cravings for carbs that have no power to give life, from any illusion he might have had that God would make choices for him, or save him from death. After 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus had first-hand experience trusting the Spirit that had led him into the wilderness to lead him out, with a clarity and grit unavailable anywhere else.

I was at least 30 before I realized that the Season of LENT was not about punishing myself for being human. And it took at least another 5 years to figure out that doing without Hershey’s or enrolling in a Class was not going to change my world. I am impressed by anyone who makes a conscious choice to change, to live without their pacifying anesthesia for a while. I mean, almost everyone uses something, perhaps Murder Mysteries, Facebook, reruns of Outlander, Pottery Barn catalogues. I am not condemning those things, just naming them as distractions we reach for when we are too tired, too sad, too afraid to enter the wilderness at the present time; when life is too much for us to make the effort to consider what our issues are really all about, or who else is involved.

The problem for most of us is that we cannot instantly power off our Cell Phones, and hear the Still Small Voice of God. What we have instead are 40 Nights and 40 days for discovering what life is like absent our usual crutches; which is how most of us learn how we started using them in the first place. Once you turn

everything else off, you might discover just how deafening silence can be. Without our regular routines to fill our waking hours, an evening can get really long. BUT if you remember to breathe, to say your prayers, then you will probably be able to make it through your first night without BREAD, or Super Powers, or Special Protection. You can get used to the sound of your own heart beating. You may even sleep a bit more soundly and wake a little happier than you remember being. Which only leaves 39 more nights to go, so don't count, just take it one day at a time.

All I know for certain is that a voluntary trip to the wilderness this Lent is a great way to practice getting free of our devils for life, not only because we lose our appetite for those things that cannot save us, BUT because it is where we practice TRUSTING the Spirit that led us to where we are as who can lead us out, AND because we learn to TRUST GOD.