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“A LONELY WALK IN THE WILDERNESS....”

Text: “Then Jesus was led up into the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil.” Matthew 4:1

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As we begin the season of Lent, I turn our attention to the Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, a familiar episode which appears in all three Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. John did not include it; I am not sure why. Let's begin by setting the Biblical setting.

In Mark, the first Gospel, the whole temptation experience is covered in a single sentence. Following the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, Mark writes, "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." (Mark 1:12-13) Mark gets an A-plus in composition: brief, succinct, concise. Ernest Hemmingway would be proud. Mark adds one detail the others missed; although he leaves many others out. Mark tells us that Jesus was out in the wilderness "with the wild beasts". Matthew and Luke do not mention it. I am not sure why.

It could be that Mark knew the perils of the wilderness first hand. It could be that he had been frightened by a wild bear or a mountain lion when his family was traveling when he was a child. That often happened on the plateau above the Jordan River Valley. As one who is afraid of the dark, and the wild beasts, and even the lowly palmetto bugs in Florida, I confess that forty days and forty nights alone in the wilderness is not my cup of tea.

Some scholars suggest that it could be rather that Mark was trying to show how Jesus reconciled human beings with the wild beasts of nature, a sign in Isaiah that the peaceful kingdom has finally arrived. (Isaiah 65:25; 11:6-9) We will never know for sure, until the last days when we can ask Mark face to face, but the wild beasts are there in Mark. In Matthew and Luke the Temptation of Jesus is a detailed narrative. Although the two differ in some minor glosses, like the order of the temptations, they tell the same story.

Speaking of story, I should alert you that a plethora of modern Biblical scholars treat the Temptation of Jesus as a literal "story", i.e., not an historical event. They speculate that it originated as a struggle inside the mind of Jesus, and his thoughts were later transposed into

the wilderness experience as we have it in the Gospels. I admit that the forty days of fasting does sound familiar, a number often used in the Bible to signify completeness, like the forty years in the wilderness of Sinai. Others, trying to be realistic, note that Jesus could not have survived a total fast for forty days and nights.

Others have problems accepting a literal “Satan”, the creature with his pointy horns, pitchfork and little red tail, running around talking to people. Many have and do take it literally. I am not sure what you might think of when I ask you to think of a literal walking, talking Devil. Some do; some don’t. But neither can deny that presence of the power of evil in the world. Martin Luther was so incensed one day that Satan would not stop tormenting him, he threw his ink well at the Devil in the Castle at Wartburg, and you can see the stain on the wall until this very day. To him the Devil was real and alive and active. Yet most of us today seem to think of a presence of evil as an inner struggle. We do not expect to run into Red Hooded malevolent elf running around our private places and little castles. Whatever we might think it is certain that Matthew would agree with Luther: Satan is a real live being.

Still others notice that some of the details in Matthew and Luke 4 seem to be more figurative than literal: e.g., there is no mountain in Palestine which is high enough to see all the nations of the world, not by eyes alone.

I leave them respectfully with their ruminations, some of which I ponder over myself. For today however, let’s take the story as Scripture, and hold on to it for dear life to see if we find the Word of God. Agreed?

Notice first, it says that Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit of God. That’s important. True to a number of other “temptations” in the Scripture, it is seldom Satan who initiates the Test. “Test” is a more accurate translation of the Greek word here, anyway. As we pray to God in The Lord’s Prayer, asking that we not lead into temptation. We are not, but God does allow his children to be tested to determine our faithfulness. He will never try to

seduce or trick us into evil, but the Bible shows that he does permit our temptations and inner struggles to take place. In fact sometimes it seems to be the ultimate test of our faith.

It was usually that way in the Bible. For example, God led Abraham up to Mount Moriah to test him, to see if he valued the Word of God above everything, including his son Isaac. Abraham passed. He was willing to sacrifice his only son, if it pleased God. The angel spared Isaac at the last moment by providing a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. When it was over, God blessed Abraham, and through him gave a blessing for all the families of the earth.

In the beginning, the Creator tested Eve and Adam, to see if they would obey his command not to eat of the tree in the center of the Garden. But the Serpent beguiled them, as they explained it to God, and they ate. They failed the test. In return, God banished them out to the East of Eden where their lives were forever changed. Sin can do that for you.

God also tested Job in the book that bears his name. Remember how Satan came to visit the Lord up in the heavenly courts. It reads almost as if an old college chum had come wandering by to compare notes. (The devil did not become an independent adversary until later.) God bragged to Satan about his servant Job. Satan objected that everyone on earth would be faithful if they had been given the good family and fortunes of Job. God said, "O.K., take them away, and we will see. Do anything you wish, only spare his life." Satan took everything except Job's life. Curiously he also spared Job's wife, but she then cursed him to his face when he was down on his luck. But in the end Job was faithful, and to confound Satan, God restored everything he has lost.

I.

As Matthew tells the story in Chapter 4, Jesus endured three temptations. The first one came after he had fasted for forty days and nights. Of course he was hungry, famished, the Bible says. The Devil began "If (some say "since") since you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread." He could easily have done it. Jesus later proved it when he

provided food for five thousand men, plus their women and children, out of five loaves and two fishes, and had 12 baskets full left over. That's astounding. He had the power to do it, no doubt about that, and I think he was probably tempted to do so. Not only could he have fed himself to assuage his own hunger; he could have turned all the stones in the wilderness into bread and there-by fed all the hungry people of the world. Wouldn't that be nice, to end hunger? Wouldn't you do that if you could, feed all the hungry people around the globe, especially millions of little children? So why didn't he?

Well, it is a complicated answer. Jesus replied to Satan: "Man does not live by bread alone, (and a woman does not either) but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God."

Note that he used a quotation from the word of God as he knew the Old Testament, the Torah. In this case, and as with the remaining two temptations, he answered with a quotation from his favorite book of Deuteronomy—not the Cat, the book. Do you recall the last time any of us quoted Deuteronomy? But, it was familiar pattern for the Lord. He did not depend on his own resources, as extensive as they were. He depended on the Word which came out of the mouth of God. And what power there is there!

Eugene Petersen, the well known scholar who is treasured by many for his marvelous and readable new translation of the Bible, titled The Message has recently written a brand new volume called Eat This Book, meaning the Bible. He suggests that we ought not to skim through the Scriptures, as we often do, to see what fine and fancy verses might intrigue us, but we should pour our whole selves into it, to gnaw and absorb and swallow and digest each morsel of the Word, the way Isaiah says that a young lion growls over his prey..." (Isaiah 31:4). That's the way we should eat the Book!

The first Psalm speaks of the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and "on that law he meditates day and night." (Psalm 1: 2). Dr. Peterson says that the Hebrew word translated "meditates" is good respectable word as far as it goes, but it far too tame a translation for the Hebrew "hagah", which is exact same word Isaiah uses for the young lion that growled and gnawed over his prey. Hagah is onomatopoeic: said out loud it actually sounds a bit like growling. "Hagah!"

The Word which comes out of the mouth of God has the power of endurance. It lasts forever, and it will not return to him empty. That kind of word requires the kind of listening which emanates in “soft purrs and low growls and steady attention, as we taste and savor and anticipate and take in the sweet and spicy, mouth-watering and soul-energizing words. “O taste and see that the Lord is good.” (Psalm 34:8 -- Petersen, Eat This Book, page 2) This Word of God we should not wolf down like a hurried fast food sandwich on the way back to the office. It should be more like a fine 6 course dinner, with all the fixins, to last you all through your day, and days.

Well, do you have your answer yet, as to why Jesus did not turn the stones into bread? I think I know party of the answer anyway. For one thing, Christ would never have used his miraculous powers to feed himself, never for his own pleasure. For another, I think he was saying that the problem of hungry children would not go away if he had fed all the hungry children in the world around 30 AD. I think he leaves that for us, those who follow in his way. The problem of hunger will not go away by sending food to the hungry, although that we must. But more, we need to find the root cause s of hunger and work them out in our society and around the world. He wants us to do it. We have the power, the knowledge and the technology today to feed all the starving children of the world and to solve the problems of hunger. But we refuse to do it. What we need is the courage and the self sacrificing it would take to make the dream come true.

More than that, Jesus came not to remove our human ills and hunger of he body; he came to heal the hunger of the human heart and soul. There are a myriad of people around trying to live on the provisions of the stones of the earth, seeking to extract their spiritual nourishment from the desert stones and earthling’s power and fancy lives --- and, that is the very miracle which Christ will perform for you and me. He will provide the Living Water in the wilderness. Man does not live by bread alone, and a woman does not either. As Jesus said to the woman at the well in John 4, “Those who drink of the water that I give them will never thirst again/” “Come unto me all ye that are weak and heavy laden, and I

will give you rest.” The Word of God alone will chase the devil away and hold you forevermore.

II.

But Satan was not done. Next he told Jesus up to the Holy City (Jerusalem) and placed him on the pinnacle of the Temple, saying to him, “If you are the son of God, throw yourself down.” Then, what a switch, the Devil quoted the Bible. I was always told that the devil can quote Scripture to his own use. In this case he turned to Psalm 91:11-12 and reassured Jesus with these words: “He will give his angels to bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” That is hilarious. Satan meant, if you toss yourself down, I will take care of you.

Just imagine how far a miracle worker could have gone in that day, or in our day too. A huckster of the faith who sells prayer cloths for a living attracts attention. People always want something to goggle over (That’s not Google.) Simon Magnus, a wonder worker of the day, actually flew through the air to impress people, with the greatest of ease, until one day the hidden wires broke and that was the end of Simon Magnus. We are too easily drawn to the quick and easy fix, the spectacular gets the headlines. We watch it for the proverbial 15 minutes of fame. WE see it all the time, day in and day out: how thrill-seeking starlets and regular folk down the street seek to be rich and famous, then they crash to ruin when their pranks catch up with them.

“Come on Jesus, throw yourself down. They will love you and admire you and remember you forever. Show the devil you can do it and make him look like a fool. Then contemporary historian Josephus wrote that it was 450 feet down from the peak of Herod’s Royal Portico, a dizzying height, for sure! It would have hit the new all over Palestine and maybe even Rome!

Speaking of “jumping down” --- each year when we come to the end of lent and they take Jesus to Calvary and hang him on a cross, I sometimes try to pretend that I do not know how the story ends. That way I can go through the agony and “be surprised” each new Easter Morning. The part the little boy inside of me listens in when they mocked him with taunts as he hung in agony, saying in effect, if you are the son of God, jump down. If you can save others, why not save yourself? The child in my wants him to do it. Why didn’t he show them, as my friend Festus used to say, “Why didn’t he defend himself?” He could have ripped the nails out of his hand and repaired the wound in his side, jumped down and said, “Look at me. I told you I was the Son of God, why didn’t you believe me. Here I am!”

But Our Lord never yielded to that temptation. He never tried to prove anything, never sought the upper hand, never tried to show anybody anything. If he had resorted to miraculous tricks and sleights of hand, they would have cheered and we would have been amazed. If he had jumped down, he would have won the day, but you and I and every other son and daughter of the Lord would have lost eternity. The eternal issue of life and death and salvation would still be waiting in the wings, unanswered, unresolved and unforgiven. “Jump down! Fly through the Air! Show him what you can do Jesus.”

But all that Jesus said to Satan that day was, “No, I won’t. I will never put God to the test. This is not a game I will not challenge my creator. I will be faithful to the end. I will be his suffering servant.” And I hear an echo of St. Paul over in Corinthians hearing God say, “My Grace is sufficient for you.” (II Corinthians 12:9). Then adding that he would be content to follow wherever the Heavenly Father would lead. I will trust in God, and him only shall I serve. So, he refused to jump down from the pinnacle of the Temple.

Jesus refused the second temptation, not because he lacked faith that God could and would hold and protect him, but because he refused to try to manipulate the Eternal Father. It

doesn't work anyway. Rather than try to manipulate God to give us what we want, we pray "They will, not mine, be done."

III.

But the Devil, the Tempter, still was not done. Third and last, he staked every thing he had on this one final desperate attempt to mislead Jesus the Christ. "He 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.'" Do not miss in passing that Satan thinks that all the nations of the world are his to give. It could be, and a good case could be made for that in this or any other time, but all the kingdoms of the world do not belong to anyone other than the Creator God. Jesus knew he could not deliver on it. Oddly the temptation was real to him as he knew that he could rule all the kingdoms of the earth. He said to the Tempter, "Away with you. For it is written, 'you must worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'" (Still another quote from Deuteronomy, this time Chapter 6.)

This third temptation was the most powerful of all, but not in the way the Tempter meant it. I mentioned previously that our lesson follows the Baptism of Jesus. I think it was then and there he learned for sure that God had chosen him to be the Messiah. It must have startled him at first. "Lord, I am just a young man from the hick town of Nazareth." And once realizing what God had in mind for him, his next question would have been: "If I am God's Chosen One, what kind of Messiah should I be? I have this special gift of power, now how best can I use it to serve my heavenly Father and all the children of the earth? Our Lord's question differs in degree, and it arrives in a different form, but it is the identical question that each of us must ask. "Lord, I have this precious gift of life, and you have showered me with blessings and possibilities and talents untold. But now, please direct me how to use them. Point out what kind of person I should be, and help me to become that one."

What kind of Messiah would he be? You probably know already that every Jew of that day worthy of his name wanted a Warrior King of a Messiah to rid them of the menace of the occupying Romans and help them ride over the selfish and totally misguided religious leaders of their present day. They wanted a Victorious Messiah who would ride into the Holy City on a great white Stallion, to put an end to their present time and to bring on the eternal Kingdom of the Lord. They wanted the Seven Great Angels in the Book of Revelation to come and pour out the wrath of God on their faithless enemies. They were infuriated each and every time they entered their beloved Temple; they had to look up at the Seal of Caesar which the Roman had emblazoned over the entrance. They meant business. They wanted a Davidic King to take command and restore their former glory. What's all this talk about a suffering servant? Surely someone has misread the Prophecies of Isaiah. Get rid of all these evil people in the world and let the rest of us enjoy the beautiful and wonderful world that God has made.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could get rid of all the evil people in the world, send them back to wherever on earth they came from and let the good old American people luxuriate in the blessings of their beloved land? Get rid of the criminals and the cheats and the commies. (My Dad used to blame everything, even the bad weather, on the Russian Communists.) But, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get rid of all the evil people. Why not?

Someone asked me the other day, when she knew I was preparing this sermon, a larger question: why does God permit evil, why does he not remove the devil from active affairs in the lives of his children. Just wipe him out and evil would be gone. Then all of us can live again in the Garden of Eden, the way it was supposed to be. That is the same question I think was on the mind of the author of Genesis when he wrote down those opening chapters of the Bible. Why? Why is there evil in the world? He answered that the Serpent first tempted Eve and then Adam and they the both of them disobeyed God. Satan the Serpent did the tempting, but it was the two people who committed the sin of refusing to listen to God. Evil to him was embodied in the beguiling snake, and the weakness of the original pair in the Garden. He too was puzzled by how potent and powerful is the

temptation to put ourselves first and the Creator God second. We are tempted to listen to the devil. It is inter-mingled all the time with both participants: the Tempter and the Tempted. But still, I ask you, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get rid of Satan and all the evil people in the world. But we can't! We can't! Why>

Well, let me answer by turning to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the marvelous Russian writer who was banished from his homeland, and after decades as a prisoner in the Gulag Archipelago, the series of Soviet incarceration camps, where he lived in isolation and in fear of execution all the time, mercifully ended up in Vermont up in New England where he continued his writing life. He did return to Russia the moment he was able.

One day as he mulled over his experiences and the temptation to harbor hatred for those who had wronged him, he came to the realization that answered the question for him and for me. I hope it helps you to understand it all a little better. It might shock you a little too. The problem is, Solzhenitsyn is speaking, is that evil is not out there somewhere in other people who are wrong. We cannot go and get them and deport them and be rid of them. Evil lives within the heart and soul of each of us. Temptation brings it out, but it originates inside the lives of Adam and Eve and every other son and daughter of the Lord ever since. It is the shadow side of my better self. My higher self is at war constantly with my lower self. Evil is not out there; it is in here, inside our hearts.

Under certain circumstances each and every one of us is capable of the worse kind of selfishness. All of us are capable of self serving behavior. Every one of us has limits to our desire to love all mankind. I would gladly kill the man who tried to violate my teen age daughter. If I am tired and worn down and troubled I can say the most outrageous things to those I say I love. Alexander said that he fought all the time not to seek revenge on those who had stolen half his life away. Our potential for good and for evil lives inside the heart of each one of us, it is not out there and cannot be removed with out fatal damage. Evil must be redeemed and touched and healed and be reclaimed by Jesus Christ. On my own the only way that I could rid myself of evil would be to tear out the very heart which keeps me alive. As Pogo once murmured, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Temptation is a peculiar word. Think of the ways in which the world around you has tempted you. Or in the privacy of your own heart and soul, think about the ways in which you have been tempted and the ways you have tempted others and yourself. What are your temptations: the subtle ones, the persistent ones, the ones almost forgotten? I sometimes think the greatest one of all is not this or that which we could do wrong; the most persistent one is the temptation to feel that our individual lives do not matter to the Lord all that much. Ah, but they do! Our temptations are not unlike the Lord's, only in degree. We are tempted to see attention, to get even, to have power, to control what goes on around us, no matter what it might mean to others.

And how Jesus Christ call help us. Hebrews says that he was tempted in all things such as we are, and he did not yield. He knows what it is like, and he is there to help you and me: Christ will see you through. Because he was tempted and prevailed, we can borrow on his power and use the words which come out of the mouth of God to stand up on our own.

Conclusion

Listen tenderly one last time to the end of the story in Matthew 4. When all the temptations were over, it says, "The devil left him." Satan finally gave up. Not that he was gone forever. All through his life Jesus continued to feel the sway of those around him who tried to nudge him off course. Even to the cross where he wondered if God had somehow had forsaken him. He shouted at Peter to get behind him and not act like Satan in tempting Jesus not to face his trails and temptations.

But each time he stood up to it, the Devil left him, time and time again. Temptation does not go quietly away because we manage to overcome it one or twice. But with the love and power of God behind us, when we resist and let our desire for what is good and right prevail, our stories end the same as the one in Matthew 4. Listen "The devil left him, and, the angels came and ministered to him. They took care of all his needs. They were waiting in the wings all the while, waiting for their cue to come on stage and help you with the struggle. Look around you, when you win and even when you don't, you are not alone.

Neither was the Lord. God's angels were with him all the while, and they will be with you and with me, now and forever more. Amen.