

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1st Sunday of Lent
Year C

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Text: Mark 1:9-13

Title: "The Way: Temptation & Baptism"

This morning we begin a new worship series based on the study by Adam Hamilton entitled The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus. If you are in one of the two groups studying Hamilton's material, you will have the privilege by way of the DVD of accompanying Hamilton to the Holy Land and seeing the places in which Jesus walked and experienced his life and ministry. It provides a better sense of what Jesus experienced as he lived his life in that land. Between now and Easter Sunday we will be spending time following Jesus, rediscovering Jesus as the unique person he was, unique enough to be called the Son of God, Savior, Lamb of God, among some of the titles we have for him. We will follow him throughout Lent to spend time with him as he teaches and heals and proclaims the good news of God's kingdom.

Before his ministry began, however, Jesus was tested. After his baptism by John the Baptist, about whom you can learn a lot more in one of the study groups, Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Before the first miracle, before the first preaching, before his first feeding of hungry people, he was baptized and heard God's affirmation: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Again, you will understand much more about the meaning of baptism if you are in one of the study groups because the video clip will take you to the site thought to be where John was baptizing, and Hamilton does an excellent job explaining the roots of baptism.) Jesus was going to need that affirmation to sustain him because the next thing we learn is that he was driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit where he was tempted.

Thinking about temptation I remembered a story about a priest. He was downtown bringing the sacraments to a sick person. He couldn't find a place to park. So he double-parked and left a note on the windshield. "This is a priest. I circled the area for 20 minutes but couldn't find a spot. Will be back in five minutes. `Forgive us our trespasses.'" When he returned he found a parking ticket with a note. "I've been patrolling this area for 20 years and have not forgiven a single ticket. To do so might cost me my job. Therefore, `Lead us not unto temptation'" (The United Church Observer, Jul. 1993, p. 50).

Temptation is a fact of life. Scripture agrees with experience that within each of us and all of us there is a strong opposition to love, health, wholeness and peace. It resides within us and among us. We are tempted on so many levels to tend to our own desires without thought of the needs of others. We are tempted to fill our own stomachs and ignore the voices of the hungry. We are tempted to go along with what is popular and easier and steer clear of the more

sacrificial, hard way that may lead to unpopularity and giving up our own comfort. We are tempted to ignore God and listen to the voice that constantly whispers that we should fend for ourselves, be independent and pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps as everyone else should, too. We are tempted all the time. It's a human condition we all share, and why should we be except? If Jesus struggled with it, who are we to think Christians are exempt? Even the Son of God experienced it. Even the presence of the Holy Spirit does not mean the absence of temptation. It was the Spirit, after all, that drove Jesus to the wilderness to be tempted in the first place. So what are we mere mortals to do about the constant presence of temptation?

Thinking about Jesus being driven to the wilderness, an experience I had as a Boy Scout came to mind. It was an experience of going to a Scout camp up north, after dark, older Scouts lead several of us on a path through the woods using torches of fire for light. We followed in line with the rest of the recruits, told to bring only a canteen, a sleeping bag, and one match. I had no idea where we were going. We came to an opening in the woods, a large campfire, men and boys dressed as Native Americans. A ceremony was held there.

After the ceremony ended an Indian guide--flashlight in hand--told me to follow him. It was dark. We were walking through the woods now. No path. Just trudging through the thick leaves on the forest floor. Twigs snapping as I tried to keep up. Right arm around my sleeping bag. Canteen around my neck, sloshing with each step. Looking around I noticed all the other lights were nowhere to be seen. I could only see the light of my guide. Otherwise it was pitch black.

Finally, the guide stops by the base of a tree and says "Stay here for the night. In the morning make a fire with your match." That was it. He then turned and walked through the woods and at some point turns out his light. I had no clue where I was. I didn't really know where the guide went either. It was dark, really dark under the forest canopy, and I was completely alone with the sounds of the forest. Rolled out the sleeping bag on a bed of leaves. Laid the canteen at the base of the tree. Crawled in the bag, pants and all, and listened. An owl hooting off in the distance. A slight breeze rustling the leaves. As you might imagine it was very difficult to sleep.

As a 14 year old, I found the experience a bit frightening. Left alone. Lost, really. Out in the wilderness not knowing what would come next. What I wouldn't have given for a GPS then. At least I might have known where I was and how to get out of the woods.

I see a deeper expression of this kind of wilderness experience in Jesus' temptation dialogue with the devil. The Gospel of Mark is a shortened version of the more lengthy one found in the Gospel According to Luke. There, Jesus, fresh from a call-confirming baptism, is led not by an Indian guide but rather by the Holy Spirit to the wilderness. He is alone not in the lush forest wilderness of the Michigan woods, but in a desolate, tree-less, near-desert-condition place. No leaves. Just the craggy hills and sparse vegetation. Few sounds. Profound silence. You can't hear that kind of silence in many places. In the wilderness of the northern woods, when the wind is resting and the birds cannot be heard, even the deepest of silence is interrupted by the sounds of carpenter ants chewing on logs. You can't find the kind of wilderness silence Jesus would have found in the Judean desert, except to go there and hear it for yourself, where the silence is so pure all you can hear is the ringing in your ears, the beat of your heart.

Jesus is in that kind of silence, alone. Not lost, but on the verge of making a change in his life, on the verge of making significant decisions about the course of his life. He walks there

knowing full well the stories of his heritage. Moses on the mountain 40 days receiving the law of God. The people of Israel wandering the wilderness for 40 years being tested by God. Elijah awaiting the presence of God 40 days in the wilderness before he hears God's still, small voice. Maybe it took that long for the voices of the world to be silent long enough for him to hear. Wilderness wandering for the people of God was not a new idea. Being alone with God was not a radical new concept. Jesus walked in the ways of his ancestors as he is led by the Spirit to wrestle with what lay ahead for him.

It's this wilderness experience the church has used through the centuries to mark the first Sunday of Lent, a word derived from an old English word, "lencten" meaning spring. Some gathered here Wednesday night, Ash Wednesday, to pray, to receive the mark of ashes on the forehead remembering that we are all mortal, that we need God and each other and that repentance is good for the soul. Lent, a time to remember our vulnerability, to remember Jesus' gift of sacrifice.

One of my favorite writers and theologians, Episcopalian, Barbara Brown Taylor has described Lent as...

...Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves. I think of it as an Outward Bound for the soul. No one has to sign up for it, but if you do then you give up the illusion that you are in control of your life. You place yourself in the hands of strangers who ask you to do foolhardy things, like walk backwards over a precipice with nothing but a rope around your waist or climb a sheer rock face with your fingers and toes. But none of these is the real test, because while you are doing them you have plenty of people around and lunch in a cooler.

The real test comes when you go solo. The strangers put you out all by yourself in the middle of nowhere and wish you luck for the next 24 hours. That is when you find out who you are. That is when you find out what you really miss and what you are really afraid of. Some people dream about their favorite food. Some long for a safe room with a door to lock and others just wish they had a pillow, but they all find out what their pacifiers are -- the habits, substances or surroundings they use to comfort themselves, to block out pain and fear.

Without those things they are suddenly exposed, like someone addicted to painkillers whose prescription has just run out. It is hard. It is awful. It is necessary, to encounter the world without anesthesia, to find out what life is like with no comfort but God. I am convinced that 99 percent of us are addicted to something, whether it is eating, shopping, blaming or taking care of other people. The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone. ("Settling for Less", Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Christian Century*, February 18, 1998, page 169.)

Jesus is in the wilderness for a long time. Alone and in the silence of the wilderness a

voice comes to him. It's a reasonable voice, a voice that suggests possible things that at first glance appear to be good. The temptations are three in number.

1. He's hungry, so what's wrong with using his powers to make food to satisfy his hunger? Better yet, why not use his power to feed the hungry of the world? Wouldn't the poor and hungry benefit from this? But Jesus ignores the suggestion as the scripture learned through his training in the synagogue flows into his mind: "Man does not live by bread alone."

2. He's charismatic. Why not run for political office or put together a military force and lead a coup d'etat? He would surely beat all the other debaters in a presidential debate. Why not govern people in ways that lead to justice for the oppressed? Wouldn't the oppressed hope for this? Again, Jesus turns the thought away with scripture planted in his mind and heart: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

3. He's the Son of God. And the voice moves to another level, choosing from scripture itself to tempt him. The Psalmist does write: 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Why not test how much God cares for him by putting himself in harm's way and prove the power of God in him? Why not provide a concrete sign that God has chosen him? Certainly those who seek proof of God would hope for this. How often had he heard people say something like, "If only God would give me a sign..."? Sign-seekers would certainly appreciate such death-defying proof of God's presence in him.

Again, Jesus turns the thought away with scripture: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." One scholar described Jesus response as discerning "...the difference between appropriate and inappropriate uses of Scripture; as Shakespeare has put it, "There is no error so gross but that some sober brow will bless it with a proper text."

Being in the wilderness is an experience of vulnerability. There, the voice of temptation can be overbearing, yet reasonable, as we wrestle with choices, as we struggle with the direction our lives will take. Again, I appreciate the voice of Barbara Brown Taylor.

That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying. Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick our pacifiers into our mouths and suck for all we are worth. They do not nourish us, but at least they plug the hole.

To enter the wilderness is to leave them behind, and nothing is too small to give up. Even a chocolate bar will do. For 40 days, simply pay attention to how often your mind travels in that direction. Ask yourself why it happens when it happens. What is going on when you start craving

a Mars bar? Are you hungry? Well, what is wrong with being hungry? Are you lonely? What is so bad about being alone? Try sitting with the feeling instead of fixing it and see what you find out.

Chances are you will hear a voice in your head that keeps warning you what will happen if you give up your pacifier. "You'll starve. You'll go nuts. You won't be you anymore." If that does not work, the voice will move to level two: "That's not a pacifier. That's a power tool. Can't you tell the difference?" If you do not fall for that one, there is always level three: "If God really loves you, you can do whatever you want. Why waste your time on this dumb exercise?"

If you do not know whom that voice belongs to, read Luke's story again. Then tell the devil to get lost and decide what you will do for Lent. Better yet, decide whose you will be. Worship the Lord your God and serve no one else. Expect great things, from God and from yourself. Believe that everything is possible. Why should any of us settle for less? (ibid.)

So this Lent if you want to find out how temptation works in your relationship with God, try giving up something you love. If you want to get a glimpse of the power of temptation and how it works on your soul, decide to refrain from doing something you really enjoy for 40 days. Remember, Sundays are a free pass during Lent. They are not included in the 40 days, so you can indulge yourself on Sundays. Try this old practice for 40 days and use it as an exercise in building reliance upon the Holy Spirit.

I also want to invite those of you who haven't been baptized or if you have children who haven't been baptized to consider being baptized on Easter Sunday this year. Baptism is God's affirmation that we are God's children and that God is well pleased with us. It is a constant assurance that we belong to God, even when temptations are strong, even when we fail in resisting temptations that are not good for us or for others, we are still God's children as acknowledged in baptism. Pray about being baptized or having your children baptized on Easter Sunday this year and speak with me about it if you have questions because Jesus made it clear that life with God has nothing to do with the gadgetry of turning stones into bread or the trickery of miraculous rescues from foolhardy antics. There isn't a need for out of this world signs to prove the presence of the sacred. We are all invited to rely on the power of God's presence and power. Somehow you just know and trust the affirmation of baptism, that we are God's children and that is enough.