

A Better Idea

March 9, 2014

Matthew 4:1-11

We're going to talk this morning about something that has baffled, confused and caused much speculation for centuries: the wilderness temptation of Jesus. Questions abound – "how could anyone go forty days without food" is probably one of the biggest.

I gave my belief about that in our "Ask the Pastor" session a couple of weeks ago, and I won't go through it again today, except to say I will admit that we could spend a lot of time dissecting the "facts vs. symbolism" aspects of this account. But I think there is much that we can learn by taking it pretty much as Matthew records it. So let's use that approach today.

A father was trying to teach his 6-year old son how to shoot a basketball. The boy would push the ball as hard as he could toward the basket but always the ball would fall short. The dad would effortlessly toss the ball toward the basket and say, "Just do it like this, son. It's easy."

The boy would try and fail again. The father would show him how again. Finally the boy said, "It's easy for you up there. You don't know how hard it is from down here."

Dads are famous for sending their sons forth with words of wisdom:

"Be a man, son."

"Make us proud of you son."

"Hold your head up high son."

"Write if you find work son."

God sent forth Jesus with these words, "I am well pleased."

With those words fresh in his mind Jesus went empty handed into the unforgiving world surrounding the Dead Sea. It is the lowest point on earth, 1200 feet below sea level. It is hot, dry, and void of life. It is a region without fresh water and life giving plants.

The monotony of this barren desert is broken only by rocky hills and dark caves. It is a world fit only for wild animals that prowl every night looking for food. It is unbearably hot in the daytime and unbelievably cold at night. It is a place of incredible loneliness.

David's graphic descriptions of life in the wilderness in one of his psalms would unnerve a timid person. He described it as a place where he was in the midst of lions, cobras, and wild dogs. He called it a "dry and weary land where there is no water."

So, off he goes, this Jesus, who is so pleasing to God the Father. Off into a crash course in human suffering. Off into a world where he has no support, no disciples, no food, nothing but his commitment to the will of God.

Finally came the last night and he was, again, alone in the desert. It was the worst night of the entire ordeal. He was so tired, so hungry, so cold. Nighttime in the desert is miserable. The insects come out. The rodents scurry about. The wild animals prowl. The reptiles slither.

Isaiah's metaphor that when the Messiah comes "the wolf would lie down with the lamb" was all too literal for comfort. The lamb was attempting to lie down but the wolf wasn't interested in lying down. He was interested in his ever-weakening prey.

The prowling wolf that night wasn't merely one of the carnivores that lived in the desert caves but more the great wolf in sheep's clothing, the roaring lion that walks to and fro on the earth seeking those whom he may devour.

The wolf that prowls about in the darkness of men's souls. That wolf was restless that night in the Judean wilderness.

Finally the sun dawned. Someone approached. At last a break in Jesus' long solitude. His visitor was quite a Bible student and understood all too well the mission to which Jesus had been called.

But the visitor would offer no comfort to the emaciated lamb of God. Instead he offered seduction. The wolf has come to attempt leading Jesus off course. He attacked Jesus, as he does you and me, at his moment of greatest weakness and in his areas of greatest vulnerability.

One of the great truths of life is that after every great moment there comes a moment of reaction. A moment of great testing.

After Elijah's great victory over the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel, he immediately went into a period of depression and doubt. Satan consistently picks such times following spiritual highs to test God's people.

Jesus' baptism was a spiritual high for him. God spoke audibly for one of 3 times in Jesus' earthly life. He spoke words of blessing to his chosen son. The Holy Spirit came. The 30-year wait was over. At long last his ministry was to begin. But first comes the wilderness.

It is in such dry, lonely times of life that Satan comes most strongly. He comes to you in your wilderness.

And I know that people have different ideas about "Satan" and "the Devil." But whatever yours may be, I think the same things apply.

Temptation comes most strongly to us when we are at our most vulnerable.

When you are away at college for the first time, alone, friendless, lonely. When you enlist in the armed services and find your self-esteem attacked by the very organization that promised to make you into a man.

When business calls you away from your family night after lonely night. When you are so tired of being alone that a smiling anonymous waitress makes your heart wander into forbidden places.

When the dearest person in the world is suddenly removed from your life forever and you are left alone, heartsick, and surprisingly angry.

At such times, it is imperative that you be able to remember a God who is pleased with you. A God who loves you and believes in you. A God who puts you on your honor and reminds you, "Make me proud of you."

It was Jesus' belief in such a God that carried him through his most intense hour of temptation.

You know being committed to do the will of God has never made a person immune from temptation. The great miracle workers all sinned: Moses, Elijah, Peter, Paul.

And Jesus. He was tempted mightily. If you were the devil what would you tempt Jesus to do? In the wilderness, Satan tempted Jesus to use his spiritual powers selfishly. He still tempts men with the same appeal.

The appeal for us is to use our gifts selfishly. If you are gifted with charm, you will be tempted to use that charm "to get away with anything." If you are gifted with the power of words you will be tempted to talk your way through life but never match your life with your words.

If you are gifted with a vivid imagination you will be tempted to exaggerate the truth to make it more interesting. If you are gifted with a keen intellect you will be tempted to be condescending to those of lesser intellect.

In the wilderness Satan attacked Jesus full force. Listen to him attack Jesus at every point as he offers him pleasure, protection and power.

"Are you hungry Jesus? Work your magic on this rock! Are you lonely Jesus? Jump! The whole world will come to watch and adore you!
Are you feeling unappreciated Jesus? How would you like to have everything in the world?"

Think about what's awaiting you Jesus, if you choose the path of the cross. Think of all the unrealistic expectations these people have for you:

"heal me" "feed me" "save me" "help my son" "help my daughter"
"have mercy on me" "I'm blind" "I'm deaf" "I'm crippled"
"my hand is withered" "I can't stop bleeding" "I have a demon"
"my daughter is dead" "we've run out of wine"
"we don't have enough food to feed the crowd" "the boat is sinking"
"can we sit on your right and left hands?"

You will remember that these are all things that Jesus dealt with during his earthly ministry.

Satan know what's coming. And he goes on. "Listen to me Jesus, I've got a better way for you to travel. Just think of the possibilities: You could feed the masses with your ability to turn rocks into bread.

Here's a grand idea for you Jesus: Every morning on the roof of the Temple a priest stands waiting to blow his trumpet at the first crack of dawn, calling men to morning sacrifice.

Why don't you take the priest's spot this morning? You could sway the masses with your ability to defy human restrictions like gravity - jump! The Bible says God won't let you get even a stone bruise from the fall.

Of course if you don't like those options, you could just recognize me as your superior and I'll do all the work for you. No 3 1/2 years of preaching to hardened hearts. No 42 months of people with their hands out. No sleepless nights. No putting up with hypocrites. No mock trials. No beatings. No cross.

I'll hand you the entire world on a silver platter. So, what do you say, Jesus? What kind of Messiah do you want to be? An overworked, under appreciated, beaten, spit upon, crucified Messiah or a Messiah who uses his brain and does things the easy way."

When Satan tempted Jesus he was challenging the kind of Messiah Jesus would be. He offers 3 tantalizing options:

1. A Messiah who focuses only on felt needs. ("Turn stones to bread.")
2. A Messiah who entertains. ("Jump from the Temple.")
3. A Messiah who compromises. ("Worship Satan.")

It should come as no surprise that the followers of Jesus battle the same 3 temptations in doing kingdom work. Take us right here at St. Paul, for example.

1. Will we be a church that primarily focuses on felt needs or will we remember that we are first and foremost to address people's spiritual needs?
2. Will we be a church that confuses entertainment with worship or will we be a church that always asks, "Is God or the glorified through our worship practices?"
3. Will we be a church that compromises so we can have bigger numbers or will we regard faithfulness as more important than numerical success?

I love Jesus' final rebuke to Satan. "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord you God, and serve him only.'" Worship? What's worship got to do with it?

I thought we were talking about having kingdoms, defying the law of gravity, and making bread from rocks. How did "worship" get in here?

Do you suppose the whole wilderness episode is about worship? The whole temptation of Jesus, about worship? And if it is, do you suppose our lives might be all about worship?

Not just the hymn singing kind of worship that we do at church but also the "presenting your body as a living sacrifice" kind of worship. The kind of worship we are called to do every day.

Is that what life is all about, deciding whom you will worship, self or God? Is that what Jesus meant when he said you can't worship God and mammon?

When an exhausted family needs someone to sit up with a sick person, what's worship got to do with it? Maybe everything.

When little children need someone to commit themselves to shepherding and teaching their little Sunday School class, what's worship got to do with it? Likely everything. When friends needs someone like you to show them Christ, what's worship got to do with it? Everything.

There is something haunting in the words Satan used to begin the first two of Jesus' temptations: "If you are the son of God..." When Jesus resisted Satan's offers in the wilderness he was making a conscious decision to follow the way of the cross.

One day in the not too distant future, Jesus would hang on a cross within sight of that Temple where Satan had reminded him that the angels would catch him if he jumped. He would hang there knowing that once again 10,000 angels awaited his cry for rescue.

He would hang there hearing the haunting echo of Satan's challenge in the wilderness, "If you are the son of God...save yourself!"

That same Jesus says to us, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

Satan said, "If you are the Son of God...use your power selfishly"
Jesus said, "If any man would come after me let him deny himself."

Satan said, "If you are the Son of God...choose the easy way."
Jesus said, "If you would come after me...take up your cross."

This day Jesus calls you to come through your own wilderness temptation. To let him help you come through it victorious and committed to a life of selflessness. A life of bearing your cross. A life worth the living.

It may not be the kind of life that will make the pages of the glamour magazines, but it is the life that our Lord calls us to.

Whatever may be our natural inclinations, Jesus is saying to us today, "I have a better idea."