

“Tested in the Wilderness”  
Deuteronomy 8:1-18; Luke 4:1-14  
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This last fall and winter in “Stories We Can’t Live Without” we walked through so many stories from the Old Testament -- rehearsing the formation of the people of Israel for oh those many years.

Now we find ourselves in these winter months and into the spring, in Jesus’ formative season: first, his birth as a new creation, then his flight to Egypt as an infant, then discovering himself as a youth in the temple, and last week, his baptism as a man in the River Jordan.

Today we read of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness when he was tested in his hunger, just as Israel was tested in the wilderness for forty years. As we read, I hope that you’ll hear resonances from the Old Testament stories we’ve heard:

- how Esau was hungry and he gave away his birthright ...
- or how after the exodus when Israel was led into the wilderness where they hungered and grumbled to God that they’d rather be slaves in Egypt than starve, and how God gave them manna anyway ...
- or how Moses was on the mountain top with God for forty days while the people below constructed for themselves the golden calf ...
- or the prophet Elijah, who was in the wilderness for forty days, fleeing the wrath of Queen Jezebel.

Like an Aaron Copeland piece that borrows from tunes we all know, or a new band that covers a song from the Beatles, the tune of Jesus in the wilderness is a familiar one indeed. But of course like any great cover, it has its own point to make, so listen to the word of God as it comes to us in the fourth chapter of Luke:

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.” ’*

*Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it*

*will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” ’*

*Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, “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.” ’*

*Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*

Now I’m not in the habit of correcting scripture, but if I were writing this story, this is how it would go: Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan and the Spirit descends on him and he hears a voice from Heaven saying, “You are my beloved Son”. Then, Jesus filled with the Spirit returns to Galilee and he begins to teach in the synagogues and is praised by everyone. Now technically, I am not changing Jesus’ story, I’m just editing out a little bit from what the scripture says. At his baptism, Jesus’ identity is confirmed for him, he knows without a doubt who he is, God’s Beloved Son, so he’s ready to go out and fulfill God’s purpose for his life, right? The problem is that there are these pesky verses in between – these verses that begin, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit returned from Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days, where he was tempted by the devil”. There seems to be this little detour between his baptism and his life’s work; this little detour between told his identity and fulfilling his vocation. The obvious question is, why?

It could be that like many young adults, Jesus chose to go out into the wilderness as sort of an “Outward Bound” program. My sister, in fact, chose to do this during her sabbatical a couple of years ago – she wanted to test herself, to push herself, so she did an Outward Bound in the mountains. Some of us test ourselves in less literal deserts, don’t we? We push ourselves physically to run the marathon. Or we test ourselves spiritually by fasting. Or maybe we test our wits by riding the rollercoaster of the stock market this last week – honestly I do not know how you traders in the congregation sleep! We test ourselves, many of us, just to prove to ourselves we can do it. Maybe Jesus chose the wilderness.

Or maybe instead Jesus *didn't* choose to go out in the wilderness. Maybe the wilderness came to him. God knows depravation and want come to millions, maybe billions of people everyday and it's not of their own choosing. Many of us who may have not hungered physically have still hungered in our wilderness times, not hungry for food, but hungry for comfort, hungry to be made well, hungry for a loved one to return to our arms, hungry for a child to be born whole, hungry for recognition for our parents, hungry for acceptance by our peers. Often enough we don't need to go finding the wilderness, the wilderness comes to us. Maybe that's what happened to Jesus.

But that's not what the scripture says, is it? No, what happens to Jesus is this: Jesus is baptized and he hears God saying, "You are my beloved Son" and then *the Holy Spirit* leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tested. *God* sends Jesus into the wilderness to be tested. Why?

Oddly enough, in all the commentaries on this passage - and I think I may have read them all - I haven't found one word about this question. So you'll have to hear what I think. This is what I think: I think that even when Jesus hears God's telling him who he is that it's never enough to have someone else tell you who you are. There's only one way that you ever figure out who you are, and what you're made of and you have to find out for yourself. It's true for all of us and it was true for Jesus too.

Think about it. In your own childhood undoubtedly you had lots of people telling you who you were and what they expected from you when you grew up. Many of us were blessed to have terrific messages about ourselves. I remember my own parents telling me over and over again "you are so smart" and after a while I began to believe them. Maybe you heard good messages too, maybe you heard, "you are so strong", or "I am so proud of your courage" or "you are such a terrific artist or musician". Some of us got messages of what we were supposed to be when we grew up. "You should go into finance, you are so good with numbers", "of course you'll go into the family business" or "you'll make a great mother someday". My father wanted me to be a lawyer. Jesus wasn't the only one who heard voices telling him who he was and what he was cut out to do.

Some of these voices can be incredibly helpful to us. They can motivate us. They can encourage us. They can guide us. But no matter how strong and good and clear these voices are, it is never enough to hear from someone else who we are. It's only when our identity is tested that we discover deep inside who we really are. This is true for us and was true for Jesus too.

Before he started his ministry even after he was baptized, Jesus had to figure out for himself who he was. He had to be absolutely clear who he was and what he believed in and what he stood for and what he was called to do. That is why God led him into the wilderness, so he would find for himself what he was made of. The tests he endured are the same ones all of us will have to face. So let's look at them.

The first test Jesus faces is this: Jesus has been fasting, he's empty and he's hungry, so the devil tells him, "If you are the Son of God, then change these stones into bread". The first and most basic question that Jesus has to answer is the universal human question, "who are you?" - not what do other people think you are, not even who do you think you are on a good day, but if you are the Son of God on this horrible day when you are starving, if this is who you are when you are hungry, when you are empty, when you have no resources to fall back on, then who are you? You know how some of our forebears answered this question - Esau, when he was hungry, sold his identity and birthright for a mess of pottage. The Israelites when they were hungry, they were ready to go back to slavery in Egypt. Our hungers are not just for bread are they? When Abraham and Sarah hungered desperately for a child, they took matters into their own hands and took Sarah's handmaid Hagar to play surrogate. When Elijah hungered for safety from the wrath of Jezebel, he fled his calling as a prophet and ran away to hide. The question Jesus has to answer is not unknown to the ancients and to us. Who are you? Really, who are you? Who are you when you're weakened? Who are you when you're vulnerable? Who are you when you're hungry? When your company's stock is sliding downhill, do you feel compelled to massage the numbers? When you're new to a social circle and the gossip starts to fly, do you join in instead of appearing judgmental? When in the hungry times, who are you? This is how Jesus answered, "you shall not live by bread alone, you shall live instead with integrity".

The second test is this: the devil took him and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said, "I'll give you all this glory and power if only you worship me". To the second question is this, "who or what is the God that you worship?" If you know who you are, you still have to figure out who or what you worship. It's one thing to say that you worship God, but it's another thing altogether to behave that way. King David, the greatest king of Biblical times, had all the glory and the power that he could want, but it wasn't enough. He had to have "that woman" Bathsheba and when she got pregnant, David had her husband killed. In that moment, David didn't worship God; he worshipped his reputation and his desires. And what of us? They say your checkbook or your calendar tell you what it is you really worship and I think that's true. And I think it's deeper than that too. I think it's really about when push comes to shove, what do we live for? Or better said, what could we not live without?

I have never been especially concerned about wealth, or I wouldn't have gone into this business. But my Achilles heel, my idolatry, has usually been popularity and acceptance. When given the choice between saying a tough word and being kind, I would much rather be perceived as compassionate and nice, even when an honest reprimand is in order. Most of us, I suspect, are prone to worshipping false gods. I ache for the teenage girls in our congregation and in our town who worship thinness and beauty. I ache for the corporate executive who cannot leave a life-killing job because he worships his position of power. And the question is for each of us, "who or what do you worship?" Jesus answers this way, "it is written, 'worship the Lord your God and serve only Him'". Even then, there is yet one more test.

The third and final test is this: the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem and placed him on the top of the temple and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written he will command his angels to protect you". The third question all of us face sooner or later is this: what do you expect of God? Even if you know who you are, even if you are clear about worshipping the Lord your God, you need to decide for yourself, what you expect of this God you worship. Now, let me be clear, it's not about what you pray for: even Jesus asked that this cup be lifted from him, if it is God's will. We pray for the things that are in our heart of hearts, we pray for the things that we most desire and God knows already what it is we long for. No, the question is, "what do you *expect* from God?" If we expect God to let us skip over the difficult challenges of being faithful -- challenges like recognizing evil when we see it ... or living through loss, or failure or grief; ... if we expect God to rescue us from the work that is in front of us, like raising our kids to be courageous, or doing our work well, or solving the problem of global warming so there is a world for our kids to live in; ... if we expect God to hand us all of life's answers on a silver platter and not have to discern for ourselves even, thank you, when somebody else is quoting scripture to us; ... if we expect these things from God, then we are expecting the wrong things from Him.

"God's angels will protect you" the devil taunts Jesus. But Jesus knows that protection can come at a price, the very high price of not doing the will of God. And Jesus answered him, "it is written, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test".

The story of Jesus in the wilderness is not a story we may welcome. How much easier it would have been if he had gone directly from baptism to ministry. How much easier it would be for all of us to go from baptism into serving God, from calling into vocation, believing in Jesus Christ to fulfilling His mission for our lives. But it's just not how it works. The wilderness may not be a story we welcome, but it is a place and a story that

we need in order for us to find out who we really are, not just when times are good, but when times are tough. No one can tell us from the outside who we are. We have to find out for ourselves, not once, I confess, but over and over again. The wilderness is a place we need because it is the place where we find out what God we really worship. It is finally a place we need to learn what we can expect from God. It is not an easy place to be - the wilderness, the time of testing. But it is a necessary place. It was necessary for Jesus, and it is necessary for us, but it is not in vain.

I confess to you that as much as I wish that wilderness times would be taken from us, these will be the times when we are most formed and shaped and strengthened and fed for the work we have ahead of us. They are the most important times of our lives, and if we fail the testing in those times, not to worry. There will be another time, I promise! But whether we succeed or fail, beloved in Christ remember this: the Holy Spirit is with us all the time and does not leave us alone. God speaks still and He is near and leads us to the place we need to be. Amen.