

Sermon 2- 21-2010
Lent I – Temptation in the Wilderness

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This story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness

Seems very far removed from our lives.

We are sophisticated.

Modern.

Progressive and rational in our thought.

This idea of Satan –

A little red guy with horns and a pointy tail, perhaps –

Coming to tempt us,

To get us to “be bad”

Well, it sounds like something from a cartoon.

I distinctly remember one episode of Tom and Jerry,

Where Jerry, the little mouse,

was torn between the voice of good and the voice of evil,

As he deliberated what to do with the cat,

Whom he had managed to capture in a great reversal of fortune.

Portrayed as a little angel mouse on one shoulder,

With white, feathery wings and a halo

Whispering into one ear,

The voice of good urged Jerry to leave the cat in the cage,
Attempting to convince Jerry that he had made his point,
And the cat had been humiliated enough already.

And a little devil mouse on the other shoulder,

With his red, pointy tail, horns, and pitchfork,

Whispering into the other ear,

urged Jerry to torment the captured cat mercilessly.

This is good material for cartoons,

But it is not real food for thought, right?

After all, we know that as free, independent, rational people,

Who understand psychology and are capable of making well-thought-out and informed decisions,

We know that this idea of the voice of temptation,

Or the urge to do something wrong,

Can easily be dealt with by simply making good choices,

or “doing the right thing.”

It’s just a matter of understanding the situation,

And, even though it may be tempting to do the wrong thing,

Choosing, by the power of our own will and our own good moral values,

To do the right thing instead.

We're all "nice" people.

We go to church.

We pay our bills and follow the law.

We don't throw our trash on the ground,

But go through the extra effort to walk all the way to the nearest trash can to throw things away.

We're so nice -

good, solid, upstanding people,

And we know how to do the right things.

So what does this story have to do with us?

This story of Jesus in the wilderness?

Well, It has everything to do with us.

The truth is, we live our lives in the wilderness,

And we can't see the forest for the trees.

We live in a wilderness of anxiety,

About what we have and don't have,

What others have and don't have,

And whether we have managed to gather enough stuff around us to be safe and respected and liked.

We live in a wilderness of distorted images of beauty,

Where billions are spent each year on products designed to change our appearance,

And our children grow up with eating disorders.

We live in a wilderness of loneliness,

of hurry and busy-ness,

as we convince ourselves that we can indeed save ourselves if we just go faster and harder and do more,

if we're just more extreme,

the nagging fear and loneliness will go away.

We live in a wilderness of meaninglessness,

Of flashing screens and moving images and key-pads and constant noise,

A wilderness where people refer to other people as "consumers" as if that is a good thing,

Where we see thousands of advertisements a day,

And get more information from people trying to sell us something than from any other entity.

For several hours a day,

Every seven minutes,

We are lied to, repeatedly,

With powerful images and words that are so convincing.

"You are in danger –

Buy our product and you will be safe."

"You are ugly –

Buy our product and you will be beautiful and beloved.”

“You are not good enough –

Buy our product and you will be.”

“You are lonely because you are not worthy of being loved –

Buy our product, and people will love you.”

“you are not a good parent –

“Buy our product and your children will be obedient and succeed.”

“Your relationship is on the rocks –

Buy our product and your marriage will be happy and stable.”

“If you are not worried, then you should be, because you might not have a good day tomorrow –

Buy our product and you will.”

“Are you anxious and stressed out yet? –

Well, we have a product for you.”

“Are you too calm –

Don’t worry, we have something for that, too.”

Yes, my friends, we do live in the wilderness,

In a desert full of stuff all around us like shifting sand,

But with nothing that will slake our hunger and thirst.

And we are lied to and tempted hundreds of times every day.

It does not matter whether we think that this is the work of a little red guy with a pointy tail and horns,

Or just an inevitable side-effect of living in a free-market society.

However we conceptualize it,

the effects of this constant barrage of distorted images and lies and manipulations,

Every single day of our lives,

Has major consequences on our spiritual health.

This is very serious business,

And what is at stake is nothing less than the health of our souls.

The story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness is ALL about us.

When Jesus encounters Satan,

Satan does not tempt him with things that are overtly evil or wrong.

“Turn this stone into bread.”

Harmless enough, really.

Jesus could even feed hungry people with the bread,

And he goes on to do exactly that –

LATER in his ministry,

When he is not answering to the devil.

Then the devil says,

“I will give you authority over all the kingdoms of the world.”

Well, if Jesus had that,

And had it instantly,

He could establish justice and peace and rule with righteousness and equity, letting the oppressed go free and ...

But again,

Jesus knows that his Kingship and power and authority CANNOT be had in this way.

After that, the devil says, basically,

“Defy death. Defeat death. Show that you are who you are.”

And again, although Jesus does exactly that,

LATER,

In this moment, he does not do this thing.

It is no accident that Jesus is tempted with the very things that he can and will do –

The things he is actually called and destined to do.

The issue here is subtle,

But of ultimate importance.

The issue is not what Satan is telling Jesus to do

The issue is whom Jesus will worship.

Likewise, the inundation of messages and images and lies that we get through media and advertising,

Taps into desires we have that are actually good – even holy - desires.

The desire to love and be loved,

The desire for relationship and for community,

The desire for a meaningful life,

For freedom and dignity.

Even the desire to feel like we can contribute something positive to the world.

The issue is not that our deepest desires are inherently evil.

The problem is that our desires –

even those that are most holy and virtuous -

Are easily mis-directed,

And pulled towards deceptive things which promise to fulfill,

But just leave us empty,

With souls that are hungry and thirsty and in agony.

This isn't just about being "nice" and "good" and "doing the right thing."

It's not that simple.

It has been shown that people who are verbally abused

Begin to believe the horribly degrading things that they hear,

day in and day out,

from their abusers,

Even things which are logically absurd and obviously contradictory.

Likewise, we begin to believe the constant barrage of lies and powerful images and symbols to which we are exposed daily –

And we begin to believe that the lies are true.

This operates on a level of consciousness –

A level of brain functioning -

That lies beneath the ability to make choices,
to choose between good and bad.

We cannot simply “will” ourselves to “do the right thing” all the time.

So what can we do?

Like in the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness,

The issue is worship.

Human beings are hard-wired to worship.

We all worship something,

The question is –

What will it be?

What will we honor, adore, glorify, and serve?

What will give us a sense of identity and meaning?

What do we cherish and value above anything else?

The fact that we are in Church this morning indicates that we at least WANT to worship God.

But we cannot do it simply because we WANT to.

Re-ordering what we love and what we value is not so easy.

The powers that lure us and trap us are too strong,

The distortion of truth and beauty is too much,
too overwhelming,

For us to fix it through our own efforts,

However valiant they may be.

Here is where Jesus' story of temptation is different from ours –

We are not the Messaiah,

We cannot be the Saviour,

for ourselves or for anyone else.

This is precisely where God's grace comes in.

When we are distracted,

and careening hopelessly towards that which is harmful or wrong,

When the last thing we desire or seek is God,

God still desires and seeks us.

When our love turns out to be flawed,

God still loves us perfectly.

When we are confused and turned around,

Adoring that which is not holy,

Captivated and held captive by that which is not sacred,

God still beckons to us,

And waits for us to turn our attention to God.

And in those moments when you WANT to worship and adore and pay attention to God,

But you are too scared,

Too hurried,

Too distracted and busy and anxious and helpless and tired and grieved to do so,

God still loves us, cares for us, and beckons us towards holiness.

God's grace does the hard work,

And all we have to do is grasp on to that one little wisp of desire –

I WANT to worship God,

And hold on to it like a golden thread.

For a golden thread it is indeed,

That binds our soul to its creator.

This is easier said than done, of course.

It is counter-intuitive

in a culture that urges us to immediately indulge and engorge ourselves,

In a society that tells us to immediately reach for an antidote to the slightest discomfort.

But part of adoration,

Part of love,

Part of worship,

Is longing.

Humbly acknowledge the hunger and thirst,

Acknowledge the emptiness within,

For what it is.

Instead of seeking the first thing that promises pleasure, power,
control,

Or even just distraction -

Hold on to your longing, your yearning, like a golden thread.

All we have to do is humbly acknowledge that yes,

We DO NEED God,

Like hunger and thirst in the desert.

And God will do the rest of the work for us.

That's what grace means.

God will do what we can't do for ourselves,

And will bring us safely through the wilderness,

And give our souls that for which it hungers and thirsts.