

## Will We Go Where Spirit Leads?

People of God, several days ago, Ash Wednesday invited us to face into a forty-day Lenten journey. Now gathered on this first Sunday in Lent, we are ready to move further into the season. Our gospel reading portrays Jesus being led by God's Spirit into the wilderness for forty days. As Christians we have set apart these forty days of Lent as a time of preparation for remembering Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. As we step more fully into the season today, I invite us to wonder together, **will we go where Spirit leads?** Please pray with me:

Creating, revealing, and sustaining God; as we step into the wilderness of Lent, we long to be more fully open to your presence and your intention for our lives. Your love is our source for resilience and courageous action. Speak the truth of your strong love into our very beings, softening us to become more receptive to your companionship and deep wisdom. As we seek to sense your Spirit's lead in our lives, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Friends, I would like to open with brief thoughts about the particular ways in which Jesus tempted and then move into exploring our need for companionship in the wilderness of temptation. Hear these words about temptation, from two very different sources:

Bill Watterson, American cartoonist and author of the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes once wrote the following: *"Calvin: Do you believe in the devil? You know, a supreme evil being dedicated to the temptation, corruption, and destruction of [hu]man[s]? Hobbes: I'm not sure that [hu]man[s] need the help."*

*N.K. Jemisin, an African American speculative fiction writer and blogger, writes about cultural conflict and oppression within the genre of fantasy and science fiction. In her book *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, Jemisin wrote "We can never be gods, after all—but we can become something less than human with frightening ease."*

This morning's gospel reading invites us to find commonalities between the way in which our greatest teacher, Jesus, encountered temptation and the ways in which we each encounter temptation. How do the ways Jesus was tempted in the desert wilderness resonate with ways we are tempted in our day-to-day living?

*We heard, "The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

It seems to me that this first temptation is about **desire for control**. Do you sometimes find yourself tempted to fight or push in any way necessary in order to hang on to your plans, your *modus operandi*, your control over decisions that affect your life and the lives of those you love? Does your grip ever become so tight that the pink color recedes under your proverbial fingernails, and you realize you might not know how to let go? Jesus likely had the power to control his access to food and even to control his hunger. But instead of leaning into the temptation for control, Jesus chose to let go of a need for control.

*We heard, "Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'God will command God's angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

It seems to me that this second temptation is about an **illusion of invincibility that can lead to recklessness**. Do you sometimes find yourself plowing ahead with taking action on your intentions, according to your goals without taking into account how tunnel-visioned actions might affect those who love you and would like to support you in your efforts? Jesus could have jumped and left God and others to clean up the mess. But Jesus did not lean into the temptation of invincibility or recklessness. Jesus considered the ramifications of his actions for those who loved him.

*We heard, "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and the devil said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to the devil, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"*

It seems to me that this third temptation is about **taking the easy way out**. Do you ever find yourself choosing the easy way out, tempted to take the road most frequently and easily traveled instead of sticking your neck out for the truth you know and feel? Jesus could have given up, tired of arguing with the forces of evil and oppression. But Jesus did not lean into the temptation to take the easy way out – when in conversation with evil or ever, for that matter.

*As N. K. Jemisin wrote, "We can never be gods, after all--but we can become something less than human with frightening ease."*

May we lean into God's love as we seek to resist temptations toward needing more, more, more; toward needing to control our lives; toward illusions of invincibility that lead to recklessness; and toward taking the easy way out.

Rooted in today's gospel story, we commonly think of Lent as a time of journeying through the wilderness.

We recognize that the wilderness feels different for each of us. Our spiritual and emotional droughts do not all feel the same. Our deep hungers are various even as we wonder how people whose physical bodies are hungry keep on keeping on from day to day. We hold various visions of shelter from the unpredictable winds of hardship in our lives even as we wonder how people without adequate shelter have survived outdoors in Minnesota and elsewhere this winter. Some haven't survived, but that is not what the media projects on the screens of our electronic devices and minds.

This morning, I invite us to consider what it might be like for each of us to experience deeper companionship as we journey in faith. Our gospel reading models how to receive the embrace of God's companionship and points us in the direction of companionship toward one another. How will you grow this Lenten season in your receptivity of God's companionship and your proactivity in seeking and accepting human companionship? Amidst the business of our lives, do we maintain a pathway – an openness to recognizing God's presence with us?

Jesus offers us an example of how to receive God's companionship. The narrative of Jesus' 40 days in the desert wilderness comes right after Jesus was baptized by his cousin – John the baptizer, and right before he returned to his hometown of Nazareth to begin his public ministry of preaching, teaching, healing and companionship. We heard at the beginning of the narrative that Jesus *“returned from the Jordan, filled with the Holy Spirit.... And God's Spirit led him into the desert.”* Jesus was physically tired and hungry and tempted to reach for some easy food. *“Scripture has it,” he said, ‘we don't live on bread alone.’”* Jesus refused to take the fast food option. The Spirit told him that he had the resources he needed to endure in that moment. **What needs to change in our social system so that people at the margins have access sufficient, healthy, filling food?**

Jesus was tired, hungry, and likely feeling weakened when he was tempted to get ahead – become more powerful by worshipping a false god. We heard, *“In reply, Jesus said, ‘scripture has it, you will worship the most high God. God alone will you adore.’”* The Spirit kept Jesus centered in his companionship with and love for God. **I wonder, what are your false gods?** We know them by how devotion to them makes us feel empty when we had hoped our devotion to a false god would empower us.

Jesus was tired, hungry, weakened, and likely close to throwing in the towel as he was tempted to jump from the top of the Temple to near certain death, escaping his exhausting wilderness journey. We heard, *“Jesus said to the devil in reply, ‘Scripture also says, do not put God to the test.’”* The Spirit somehow breathed enough air into Jesus’ physical and emotional lungs to help him feel that he could keep moving along the journey, putting one foot in front of the other. **I wonder, when has God’s Spirit breathed enough air into your physical and emotional lungs so that you could keep going when giving up seemed like a more obvious option?** And if you don’t recall a particular time, **who in your life might remind you how to sense God’s sustaining breath? Or to whom might you provide that reminder?**

The gospel narrative depicts Jesus wandering alone. By virtue of us being gathered (through the slush) in this Sanctuary and via live stream during this hour, we are at some level not alone on this journey. Jesus’ journey in the desert wilderness reminds us that God’s Spirit is our companion and our presence together here this morning reminds us that we are also companions to each other along the journey. I think we all need to have humility in order to reach out and seek companionship in our very particular sufferings and yearnings – in our very particular journeys.

In his book *Nine Essential Things I’ve Learned About Life*, Rabbi Harold Kushner stated in a chapter entitled “Religion Is What You Do, Not What You Believe,” the following. Writes Kushner:

*“The role of religion is to bind us to other people, in order to evoke together the sense that God is in our midst. We don’t go to church or synagogue to find God. God may, indeed, be more accessible in nature on a sunny day. We go to church or synagogue to find other worshippers who are looking for what we are looking for, and together we find it.”*

And Kushner also quotes the great Jewish theologian Martin Buber who once was asked, ‘Where can I find God?’ *“And Buber’s answer was, ‘God is not found in churches or synagogues. God is not found in holy books. God is not found in the hearts of the most fervent believers. God is found between people. When someone acts toward another person as his religious faith tells him to, God comes and bridges the gap between them. They are joined for those moments by bonds of holiness. The religion of your heart becomes real only when it is translated into action.’”*

Friends, how might you reach out for companionship? How might you offer companionship?

I come to a close with words from a meditation called “The Protestor and the Prophet,” credited to Robert Rowland. Let his words lead you from wondering about intimate companionships in family and in community toward wider circles of companionship. Rowland writes:

*“I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and discussed hunger  
I was sick and you thanked God for your health  
I was lonely and you left me alone while you went to pray for me  
You seem so holy, so close to God; but I’m still hungry, I’m still lonely, and I’m still cold.”*

Our congregation’s vision statement is one of *“An inclusive community, celebrating the unconditional love of God...”*

May the companionship that we find with God and with one another be something that ripples further and further out in our lives – so that religion (as Kushner shares in his chapter title) is about *“what we do rather than what we believe.”*

I invite you to close your eyes as I share a final quote from a theologian named Jeffery Tribble about this Lenten journey: *“If we choose the Lenten struggle to be intentional and receptive to the grace of God, we will encounter a faithful God who leads us not only into the wilderness but also through the wilderness.”*

Who will you reach out to as a companion this Lent? How will you make space to notice God’s companionship in your life? Whose companionship will you accept and embrace? May we journey on in faith and hope – through the wilderness. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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March 6, 2022 (Lent 1)  
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13