

Into the Wild - Sermon Based on Matthew 4:1-11
by David Hindman on Sunday, March 13, 2011

When I read the Gospel story this week I was stopped dead in my tracks at verse 1 when I read, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Huh!? Why would the Spirit instigate temptations of Jesus? Isn’t the Spirit supposed to shield us from temptation? What’s going on here?

Let’s set the stage for this story. In the previous chapter, Matthew tells about John the Baptist’s ministry in the wilderness. Jesus shows up to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. At first John demurs and says Jesus should baptize him. But Jesus insists. Matthew has Jesus say to John, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” So John consents; Jesus wades into the water and is baptized. And as he comes up, the heavens are opened and Matthew reports, “...he saw the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove, and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” And then this same Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days and nights and to be tempted and tested and tried by the devil. Only after those long nights and days in the wilderness and besting the devil does Jesus’ ministry begin.

What's going on here? Perhaps the Spirit leads Jesus to that wild place to strengthen and empower him for the challenges that lie ahead, not only from Satan but from the ministry and cross that lie ahead. And if Jesus is going to continue to follow God's lead he will go wherever the Spirit blows – to the wild, to Galilee, to the cross.

What's going on here? There are clues in the Old Testament. In our story Jesus is tempted to put God to the test, to take matters into his own hands, to get power for himself. That sounds a lot like the man and woman in Genesis. They fail the test. But Jesus passes. In the New Testament Paul talks about the old Adam, the old man who failed to live in God's way. Then Paul describes Jesus as the new Adam, the new man who shows the right way to live in the world and in relation to God. Following the ways of the first Adam leads to death; the ways of the new Adam lead to life. Here's some amazing, incredible good news – it is possible for us to live life differently. Adam or Christ – the truly way is Christ's. We have Jesus' word and example that we can live the way of trust and obedience and complete dependence on God's care for us. So when we are tempted to live on our own terms and pass the buck by saying, "The devil made me do it," there is another way. There is a power greater than the devil and it is God's gift to us through Christ.

But there's more. Jesus is in the wilderness 40 days and 40 nights. In the Old Testament, the prophet Elijah's greatest moment of success is when he tests the power of the God of Israel against the power of the false gods of Baal on Mount Carmel. When Elijah's God wins the contest Queen Jezebel threatens Elijah with death. Immediately after his moment of glory he runs for his life. He flees first to the wilderness, where an angel serves and feeds him. Sound familiar? In the strength of that food he goes 40 days and nights to Mt. Horeb or Mt. Sinai. Along the way Elijah gets his bearings and regains his commitment, and hears God's call to new duties. Here in Matthew's gospel, immediately after the high moment of baptism glory, with purpose the Spirit leads Jesus to step away from daily life to listen and learn what it means for him to be the Son of God and what lies ahead on the way always to please and honor God. Baptism is a step on a lifelong journey of commitment and trust and obedience. It is not the last step toward becoming a church member. Baptism doesn't make life smooth and easy or free from trials and temptations. Even for Jesus, they will continue throughout his life. Peter calling him away from the way of the cross. The dark night of the soul in the Garden of Gethsemane. On the cross when mockers say, "Since he is the Son of God, let him come down, and we will believe." Baptism simply is a marker on a journey of learning what it means

to live for God alone. Daily we are led into the wild to test the options put before us to see if they be of God and to reject the temptation to give anything else first place in our heart.

Elijah isn't the only Old Testament character sent into a wilderness. When the Hebrews make their escape from Egypt, they go through their own type of baptism waters in the sea of reeds and are led to the wilderness where they wander for 40 years. It's a time of testing for them to learn humility and obedience, and they're not the best students. They doubt God can provide for them and complain about hunger. But God provides them manna, bread from heaven. And while they're there Moses goes up Mt. Sinai for 40 days and nights. Moses fasts and meets God there to learn the right ways to live. But while he is away the Hebrews take matters into their own hands. Instead of learning to trust and wait for God, they make gods for themselves. And at the end of the journey, Moses is taken to a high mountain to see, not all the kingdoms of the world, but all the Promised Land. He can't enter that new land because of previous stubbornness and lack of trust in God. Matthew's telling us Jesus is the new Moses. He's the new Israel trusting and obeying a God who's dependably reliable to meet all our needs.

What's going on here? How does Jesus pass the test and defeat temptations put before him? The source for every rejection of the devil is scripture. Jesus life is deeply rooted in the Word of God. It's his anchor, his weapon of choice. If we want to die to sin and live the wise ways of God, the discipline of regular and faithful scripture study is crucial. Lent is a good a time to begin or strengthen that lifeline.

And Jesus was prepared and strengthened for his testing through the time he spent alone in the wilderness. Going into the wild places of silence and solitude and suffering and learning to completely rely on God equip us for battle. In his book *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, Belden Lane writes of his mother's dementia and dying with cancer and how that wilderness experience led him into a deeper reliance on God. The film *Invictus* tells of the predominantly white South African rugby team winning the World Cup, and the encouragement and support they received from then newly elected black president Nelson Mandela. When the team goes to Robbin Island where Mandela was a prisoner, the rugby team captain stretches his arms wide in Mandela's cell, touching the walls. It's that small. And we see that white player imagine spending 30 years there. For Mandela it was time for testing and iron striking iron strengthening him for the dimly seen new day of leadership that lay ahead. Ours is a 24/7 world of temptation and

instantaneous gratification and snap judgments. If we're going to be the people we were created to be, we need silence and prayer and solitude. Instead of choosing quick and easy paths, we can embrace suffering as a way of potential wisdom. Follow the Spirit's lead: carve out quiet time and step from the world's busyness. Turn off the media. Do one less thing. Listen. Heed the still small voice of God heard in the wild silence.

Jesus treats the devil as a broken power. He's not impressed or cowed by evil; he's done with it and won't let it run or ruin his life. Jesus knows who's truly in charge: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Jesus bets his life that's true and offers us that life-giving way. In the words of a 4th century preacher we can say to the devil, "I too am made in the image of God. I have put on Christ; by my baptism I have become one with him. It is you that should fall prostrate before me. Begone, Satan!" Trust and believe this good news, and live!