

“A Lenten Walk on the Wild Side” based on Luke 4:1-13

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Yes, we all have our temptations. At a recent clergy gathering three pastors were unburdening their souls and making their confessions. “I must own up to a terrible impulse to drink,” said the first. “The temptation haunts me constantly, and sometimes I give in to it.” “Well,” said the next, “I don’t have too much trouble with liquor, but I have many lustful urges. I fight the temptation desperately, but sometimes I fail to resist.” After that, there was a pause. Finally both turned to the third and one said, “And you, what is your persistent temptation?” Sighing, the third said, “I’m afraid I have an irresistible impulse... to gossip.”

Lest we miss the point of Jesus' wilderness sojourn, let's recall how temptation works. A North African tribe has an interesting way to catch monkeys that says a lot about temptation. The hunter hollows out a gourd and makes a hole just large enough for a monkey's hand. He then fills the gourd with nuts and ties it to a tree. Attracted to the smell, a monkey sticks its hand inside. And though it could easily relax its grip and withdraw its hand, the temptation to have those nuts is so strong the creature will continue to hold on, guaranteeing its capture. To be tempted, our desire must be so deeply embedded in us that we're unwilling to let go. Temptations get us where we're most vulnerable.

Vulnerability is at the heart of Luke's story. It's set in a place of radical vulnerability — the wilderness — unfamiliar, dangerous, populated by wild beasts and demons, where fears, weakness, and desperate needs must be confronted. There, Jesus has a choice. Facing hunger, will he rely on God for nurture or satisfy his own needs? Will he trust in God or seek to prove to himself and others that God cares for him in a special way? Will he serve God or compromise and enjoy the headiness of power and the thrill of control? His encounter with Satan dramatizes the conflict between human desires — what we want — and obedience to God.

We hear this story and it's easy to think of a battle of wills — Jesus versus Satan. But remember this passage begins, “Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where... he was tempted by the devil.” Now, in Greek, the word “temptation” and “test” are the same. While Jesus is “tempted” by the devil he's also “tested” by God. The idea that God tests us is reflected in the Lord's Prayer, “Lead us not into temptation,” and is perhaps better translated, “do not lead us to the test.” Fact is, we're continually faced with a test...of our character.

Our temptations reveal something about us. Take the ambitious salesman who was delivering a bid to a potential client. Just as the client was telling the salesman that, above all else, his company prized honesty, the man was called away from his desk. The salesman looked around and noticed a competitor's bid laying on the desk, though the total amount was covered by a soda can. Well, the temptation was just too great. The salesman reached over to move the can to see what the competition was bidding. But as he lifted it, his heart sank... as he watched thousands of BBs pour from the bottomless can and scatter across the floor.

How we respond to our temptations reveals who we really are. Jesus' experience of temptation required looking within himself and making a choice about who he was going to be. That choice was defining; it clarified who and whose he was. But it was also freeing; it unfettered and empowered him to be and to do all that God intended for him.

Our wilderness times reveal our own temptations. We know what wilderness times really mean; not the loon's cry and the canoe on the pristine lake, but the wilderness of broken relationships or shattered dreams, abandonment or loneliness, illness, grief, or depression. Whether we bring these on ourselves or they're out of our control doesn't matter. What matters is they'll always present us with a choice about how we'll respond. We'll be tempted, when we're feeling desperate to lie or cheat; when we're longing for acceptance to try to please others, even if we know it's wrong; when we're angry to lash out; when we're feeling inadequate to strive for position; when we're feeling depressed to boost our spirits and mask our pain with food or drugs or booze.

I have my own temptations. Indeed, I struggle with temptation every week... writing my sermon. I know that humor and stories are powerful preaching tools. Yet, there's the temptation to use them to woo you. See, I'd really like you to love and adore me. And, honestly, in my wilderness moments — feeling ineffectual, beleaguered, criticized — I'm tempted all the more to try to please you. Yet I know that if I use stories and jokes only to entertain you I may fill you with good feelings but deprive you of spiritual nourishment, all because of my need to have your approval.

Yes, we'll be tempted in our wilderness times, but an opportunity will also arise. The word "opportunity" has Latin roots meaning "toward the port." It suggests a ship taking advantage of the wind and tide to arrive safely in harbor. Confronting our temptations offers us a port in the storm, too; a new lease on life that comes from being our true selves; a time of testing in which our hard choices demonstrate who we are. Fortunately, when I'm tempted to give you worshipainment, I hear my father's voice reminding me my job isn't to lull you into complacency with safe and pretty words but to set challenges before you, to create in your collective spirit visions of all that you can be. And always — when I'm true to myself and my calling — I may not get your praise and affection but I feel whole because what I've done has meaning, enlivened because I've acted with purpose, at peace because I have integrity, and blessed because I'm right with myself, my family, my neighbor, and my God.

When Jesus responds to the devil he quotes Deuteronomy, the laws for everyday life. In this way, he reminds us that being God's people means always having God's love and always having God's demands. He journeyed to the cross, putting God's interests above his own, living the principle of "thy will be done." Mark Twain said, "When I read the Bible, the parts that trouble me the most are not the ones I don't understand, but the ones I do understand." Jesus' obedience to God is so plain to see that we can't fail to understand, and for most of us it will be troubling. For we know — we know! — we're called to follow Jesus' lead by seeking to be God-serving and neighbor-serving and not only self-serving.

Such obedience isn't easy. But we must keep in mind Aristotle's wisdom that "Wicked people obey from fear, good people, from love." Like Jesus, if our obedience has its source in our love for God — if it springs from understanding the depth of God's love and loving care for us — we may find that God's interests and our interests are not so mutually exclusive. We may discover that being God-serving fills, and satisfies, and nourishes us in ways and to a degree otherwise unimaginable. For we cannot live by bread alone. To be truly filled and nourished we must feed on God's word of love and demand. So, if we must give something up for Lent, let it be our illusions of self, so that we may find our true selves, and live with wholeness and

integrity, purpose and meaning in the company of God. Take heart, beloved; even Jesus had the help of ministering angels in his time of wilderness temptation.