



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: February 21, 2010

Wilderness Temptations and Us, Robert B. Culp

Luke 4:1-13

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once observed that “Religion is what people do with their solitude.” And I can’t help but wonder if he didn’t have this particular story from Luke in mind. Fresh from his memorable baptism in the Jordan River where he received confirmation of his identity, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness all alone to be tested ... to find out what was really at the bottom of his heart. And as one commentator has noted, that is knowledge that he could only come by “after he had been eyeball to eyeball with the Devil.”

Solitude, in many respects, is where you have it out with the powers that be, and where you decide the basic issues of your life. For example, what we are going to do with our loneliness, for everyone of us finally is alone. In birth, in death, and in between we find ourselves stumbling along in the footsteps of lonely literary prototypes such as Abraham and the Prodigal Son, or Ulysses and Faust.

But also, solitude is where we decide how we are going to be with other people: whether we will be trusting or suspicious, accepting or judgmental, open or reserved. It is where we decide how much money we don’t need, where our instincts for self-preservation go up against our convictions about self-sacrifice. It is where we encounter our insistent urges and yearnings, our highest hopes and our deepest dreams and ... our most troubling fears. Solitude, in short, is a scary thing. In fact, as Henri Nouwen once reflected, solitude is so scary that “only infrequently do we stop to pay calls on ourselves, and even then we are lucky to find anyone at home.”

And so it is that Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness – a period of preparation between his own baptism and his ministry during which he was sorely tested by the devil. He ate nothing during that time, and like his ancestors in the faith (Moses, Elijah, and Israel in their own wilderness wanderings), near the end of his sojourn in the desert, Jesus was famished, tired, and vulnerable. Of this wilderness period of testing, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “It was hard. It

was awful. But it was necessary, for Jesus and for God – to cement their relationship – and to remind everyone who ever heard the story that it was humanly possible to remain loyal to God.”

Many years later, sensing the need to experience a springtime renewal for the soul and taking its cue from Jesus’ time of testing, the early church established the season of Lent ... a period of 40 days for self-examination and penitence, for fasting, forgiveness, and prayer. Such a season was not for the purpose of self-punishment, but for the purpose of self-awakening. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comforts are gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone, and not by what we can supply ourselves. Forty days to serve as a sort of “outward bound program for the soul” by which we seek to grow closer to the life of our Lord Jesus.

For forty days and forty nights, Jesus was in the wilderness where there was no sign of God at all ... quite in contrast to the time of his baptism when a dove descended and God’s voice was heard declaring him to be his beloved child. In the desert, though, the sky stayed shut, no doves appeared, no voice from heaven spoke those loving and reassuring words. There was just Jesus himself, the lonely desert sights and sounds, and finally, of course, the devil.

Many of us are familiar with Jesus’ wilderness encounter with the devil, and we may even know the respective lines of their dialogue by heart. Even so, it is important for us to remember what the devil was up to in his testing of Jesus, and how Jesus responded to those temptations.

- * First he tried to get Jesus to practice some magic – turn these stones into bread, to feed your hunger and to feed your famished people.
- * Next he nudged Jesus to call on God for special protection – throw yourself down from the temple, so God’s angels will lift you up and prove to your people that you can rescue them from all danger.
- * Finally, he tempted Jesus to take control of all the kingdoms of the world – all these kingdoms, the devil promised, I will give over to you, Jesus, if you will fall down and worship me.

In all these temptations, the devil seems to be subtly suggesting to Jesus that he deserved better than what God was giving him. Why should the son of God be experiencing hunger pangs in the desert? Why should he so much as stub his toe or bruise his shin while journeying alone? And why on earth should he be subject to Caesar when Caesar should be subject to him, along with all the other powers and principalities of the world? He is tempting Jesus to rise above the hunger, to eliminate the danger, to overcome the helplessness of the human condition.

Indeed, the devil is tempting Jesus to seize something better for himself. After all, he is the son of God, isn’t he?

But as this narrative spins out, we begin to discover what being the son of God truly means. For in this story, Jesus demonstrates who he really is not by seizing power, but by turn-

ing it down; not by choosing the proud path of upward and self-centered aspirations, but by embracing the humble path of downward mobility; not by asking for special protection or by seeking political power, but by accepting all the risks ... all the trials ... all the poignant pains and exquisite joys of what it is to be a human being.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “It is, after all, the only way humans will ever learn what ‘son of God’ really means. A son of God is not someone who is related to God by rising out of his humanity, but someone who is beloved by God for sinking into his humanity even when he is famished, even when he is taunted by the devil himself. It is someone who can listen to every good reason in the world for becoming God’s rival, and remain God’s child instead.”

While this is mainly a story about Jesus’ identity, it is also a story about who we are, as well. It’s a story that nudges us to look afresh at the decisions we make along our life journeys. It asks us to consider afresh all the choices and invitations, all the insistent requests and temptations to which we may say “yes” or “no.” And it reminds us powerfully that our choices each day affect very much how we will live our lives, and how full or empty they may become. It’s been said that our capacity to say “yes” or “no” is one of God’s greatest gifts to us. But it is a gift many of us do not exercise. Instead, many prefer to believe that we are victims of circumstance, and so we let our freedom to choose atrophy, allowing ourselves to be carried along by this or that current, whim, or fancy.

The season of Lent, though, is a good time for us to build up our spiritual muscles, so to speak, by reflecting honestly about our own yes’s and no’s, as well as the need to make our choices more Christlike every single day. Lent invites us to enter into the wilderness and to ask of ourselves the hard questions that solitude brings, especially questions about what we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone. Sitting by ourselves all alone at the kitchen table, or striving to succeed or simply get by in an economy that seems to mock our every effort, or thirsting for some sense of personal significance in a world where so many are neglected and forgotten, or wandering amidst such desert experiences that come our way ... we may find ourselves wrestling with such searching Lenten questions as these:

- * what is it that we reach for and believe will satisfy us in our needs?
- * when we look at ourselves in the mirror, what do we see in it that we like most, and what do we see that we most deplore?
- * if you had only one last message to share with the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in 25 words or less?
- * of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo, and which is the one that makes you happiest?
- * is there any person in the world or any cause that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?
- * if this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

To hear ourselves try to answer such questions as these is for us in our Lenten sojourn to begin to hear something not only of who we really are and are trying to become, but also to whom we really belong. The answers we formulate may be humbling, unsettling, even depressing all in all. But if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of such a journey, something like Easter and new life may be at the end ... and that is our hope and our promise.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, within the hungers, hurts and hopes we know in the course of our living, may we listen to your words, be inspired by your example, be empowered by your Spirit so that we may remain loyal to you and strengthened to grow in our discipleship. Feed us today the food you alone provide and fill us with the new life you offer, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen