

Miracle, Mystery, and Authority

Luke 4:1-13

Whitefish United Methodist Church

February 21, 2010

- † It's the first Sunday of Lent, the time when the church traditionally focuses on Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. Here Jesus ponders the different paths that he might take in his ministry, knowing that the only path he will tread will lead him to Jerusalem, to the cross, and to suffering. Here Jesus stands on the threshold of choosing his true identity and following it, wherever it leads.
- † Only two of the four gospels give the long version of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. John leaves it out altogether, and Mark's gospel covers forty days in just two sentences: the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, he was there forty days, Satan tempted him, wild beasts kept him company, and angels waited on him.
- † If you remember more than that, and not just because you know the Willie Nelson verse in the original version of "We Are the World," (which, by the way, was wrong in his affirmation that Jesus turned stones into bread,) you are remembering Luke or Matthew's version of the story.
- † These two gospels go into detail about what the devil said to Jesus and what Jesus said back. Notice that in today's story, the devil is biblically more literate than Willie Nelson—Satan knows just where to find the Bible verses he needs to put Jesus to the test. But Jesus knows more than just what the

Bible says—he knows how to DO what it says, which is a lot more important.

- † Every time the devil offered him more—more bread, more power, more protection—Jesus turned him down. Jesus says NO to the equivalent of waving a wand and providing all the food anyone could want. He says NO to a Wizard of Oz kind of power that is all bluster and show. He says NO to a golden parachute grander than even that of the greediest of financiers.
- † Instead, Luke says, Jesus is full enough—of the Spirit that is—so that he is able to worship God and serve only God’s purposes, God’s kingdom. And so Jesus forgoes the path offered by Satan and embraces what, in worldly terms, is weak and illogical.
- † In his great novel, The Brothers Karamazov, Fyodor Dostoevsky includes a parable where Jesus, who has returned to earth in the midst of the Spanish Inquisition of the 16th century, is confronted by its head, the Grand Inquisitor, who tells Jesus that he made all the wrong choices when he was in the desert.
- † He ought to have turned stones into bread, he should have thrown himself off the pinnacle of the temple, and he should have taken the opportunity to be king of all the nations of the earth. The choices were wrong because Jesus had misunderstood human nature—human beings are not able to handle the freedom that God gave them.
- † In the novel, one of the brothers Karamazov visits another with this story he has written about Jesus’ return. During a particularly active time of burning infidels in Seville, Spain, in the 1500’s, Jesus appears on the scene—humbly, compassionately. He is immediately recognized by everyone. The people flock to him. Children strew flowers before him and cry out “Alleluia!”

- † Being Jesus, he heals a blind man and brings a man's dead daughter back to life. And then he is arrested on the orders of the Grand Inquisitor, sentenced to death, and imprisoned. The Grand Inquisitor visits Jesus in prison and explains why he has been arrested and why he must be executed.
- † And the reason for both stems from Jesus' encounter with Satan in today's scripture lesson. As the Grand Inquisitor explains, Jesus, in his exchanges with Satan, had an opportunity to guarantee believers by giving them bread—just as he could have enticed followers by throwing himself from the temple pinnacle and tempting God to perform a miracle.
- † He could have ensured as many disciples as he wanted in all the nations if he had only agreed to Satan's offer on the high mountain to take all the kingdoms of the world as his. Jesus had been offered *miracle, mystery, and authority*. He rejected all three—instead giving men and women perfect freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong, building up and destroying.
- † In one of the most beautiful and haunting quotations on the spiritual life in literature, Dostoevsky puts these words in Satan's mouth: *Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering. And behold, instead of giving a firm foundation for setting the conscience of man at rest forever, you chose all that is exceptional, vague, and enigmatic; you chose what was utterly beyond the strength of men, acting as though you did not love them at all—you who came to give your life for them!*
- † And so the question for us, as we begin Lent with Jesus in the wilderness, is: “Who is right—are we able to confront similar temptations to those put before Jesus and choose as he did? Or are we so enslaved by our fears, our

comforts, our certainties that we cannot choose to make room for God, to be full of the Spirit, instead?

- † First, the good news: we are at an advantage here in our part of the world—we live close to the physical wilderness of grand and vast forests, rushing waters, and shining mountains. There is a reason that there is a number of what are called “emotional development academies” tucked into the mountains of northwest Montana. Maybe you know someone, like my godson, who has benefited from a version of these “Outward Bound” type experiences.
- † Here students are drawn from all over the country to live in wilderness settings so that the distractions and addictions and destructive behaviors that hold them captive can be taken away. These wilderness experience schools have formed a significant part of our economy, but they are expensive. In our current economic downturn, many are facing closure, as was the case for Hope Ranch.
- † These schools have helped many young people find their true identities—they have given them the strength to empty themselves of what has been destroying them and to fill themselves up with a creative and affirming identity.
- † For those of us who are physically able, a sojourn into the wilderness is like a balm in Gilead for the sickened soul. And when we hike or ride into the woods, our minds clear and our hearts soar, and we are blessed.
- † But for many of us, a trip to the mountains isn’t possible, and we find ourselves in a wilderness not of our own choosing. Perhaps it is in a hospital waiting room, our boss’s office when we’ve lost our job, an empty house devoid of a loved one’s presence. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your chest, where you

begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own breath.”

- † Most of us have been to a wilderness of that sort, and we wish we hadn't. But we can take a lesson from Jesus. “What did that long famishing stretch in the wilderness do to him? It freed him—from all devilish attempts to distract him from his true purpose, from hungry craving for things with no power to give him life, from any illusion that he might have had that God would make his choices for him.
- † After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus had not only learned to manage his appetites; he had also learned to trust the Spirit that had led him there to lead him out again, with the kind of clarity and grit he could not have found anywhere else.”
- † Now, a word about the devil mentioned in this scripture passage. Luke did not imagine pitchforks, horns, pointy tails, or red long-johns—or even Anthony Hopkins. No, it might be closer to imagine a seductive voice offering very “good” things to Jesus, an attractive strategic plan for his ministry.
- † More than one writer suggests that the tests come from deep within Jesus himself, hungry and alone and wondering. I am intrigued by what N. T. Wright says: “The devil’s voice appears as a string of natural ideas in his own head. They are plausible, attractive, and make, as we would say, a lot of sense,...and he must begin by defeating the devil at the most personal and intimate level.”
- † So, what about you? Are you willing to enter the wilderness of Lent for a little soul-searching? Are you willing to sign up for a bit of “Outward Bound” for the soul? For most of us Lent would be a good time to consider

what it is that works as an anesthesia—a way to keep us asleep so we don't have to consider our soul, our true, God-created self.

- † Again, I quote Barbara Brown Taylor: “In a culture of plenty, I am impressed with anyone who decides to make it without anesthesia for awhile—to give up whatever appliances or habits or substances they use to keep themselves from feeling what it really feels like to live the kind of lives they are living.
- † I mean, almost everyone uses something—if not anesthesia, then at least a favorite pacifier: murder mysteries, Facebook, reruns of Boston Legal, Pottery Barn catalogs, Bombay Sapphire martinis. (So how does she know my life, and I've never even met her, except for the martini part?!!)
- † I'm not saying those are awful things. I'm just saying they are distractions—things to reach for when a person is too tired, too sad, or too afraid to enter the wilderness of the present moment—to wonder what it's really about or who else is in it or maybe just to make a little bed in the sand [of the desert wilderness].”
- † Ouch. So here we are, at the beginning of that sacred season of Lent—a time meant for cultivating our true identities as creating, compassionate, risk-taking followers of Jesus. What are we going to do about it?
- † I love a line from something that Nora Gallagher wrote: She describes walking into an Ash Wednesday service and remembering how hard it was to give up smoking, which she did one Lent. A friend of hers quipped earlier that day, “Anne's giving up drinking, Terri's giving up chocolate, and I'm just giving up.”
- † Maybe there is some wisdom there—What if we tried giving up our pacifiers for Lent—at least a couple of them? And what about substituting them with a few episodes of trusting in God's Spirit to fill us instead?

- † We DO have a choice. And I believe in Jesus, and not the Grand Inquisitor. With God's help, I pray that you do, too. And it's not mainly about belief. It's about living, even when the believing becomes difficult. Won't you use this time of Lent to look around whatever wilderness you find yourself in?
- † Will you listen for those seductive and sometimes self-deluding voices and then plug yourself instead into God's call upon your life? You were made for love, for mercy, for compassion, for joy. You are made in the image of God, free to live into it.
- † And that's the true miracle, mystery, and authority. Amen.