

March 6, 2022. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

O God, as we begin the journey of Lent, open our hearts and our minds to hear your Word to us in the wilderness, as we walk that journey with Christ.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 4, verses 1 through 13. Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, **2** where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. **3** The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” **4** Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” **5** Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. **6** And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. **7** If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” **8** Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” **9** Then the devil[c] took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, **10** for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ **11** and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” **12** Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” **13** When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, and thus we begin the Lenten season with the story that provides the biblical foundation for the 40 days leading up to Easter (not including Sundays).

The story of Jesus being tempted by the devil for 40 days in the wilderness, it's the story that shows us the power of following the spirit into the wilderness for a 40 day journey, and invites us to start our own.

With that Lenten theme in mind - that of our own personal journey into the wilderness, it's tempting to read this story of Jesus being tempted by the Devil and see that Jesus is showing us, too, how to resist temptation.

And while that may be true, I think we lose some of the theological beauty and nuance of this story in scripture if we jump there too quickly. For when we unpack this story, and see how this story functions in the gospel, we can come to see it's not really a story about temptation, or even about us, but instead is truly about Christ and his identity as God's son.

Right before this story in Luke's Gospel is the baptism narrative. When Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, the holy Spirit descends upon Jesus and a voice speaks from heaven: you are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Then the same spirit (the spirit that anointed him as God's son) is with Jesus and leads Jesus into the wilderness.

So when Jesus is being tempted by the Devil, he knows he is the son of God. And actually, the devil knows it too.

In verse 3, when the devil says IF you are the son of God... a perhaps more accurate translation from the greek is not IF, but SINCE.

The devil says SINCE you are the son of God. Both the devil and Jesus know that Jesus is the son of God.

So these temptations are not about making Jesus prove he is the son of God, but rather testing: what kind of Son will he be?

We can see this story as Jesus kind of figuring it out: what does it mean to be the son of God? And what will this mean for his future, for his ministry?

For after he leaves the wilderness he begins his ministry in Galilee. So what kind of Son will he be?

It's significant that Christ wrestles with this question in the wilderness. The Wilderness recalls back to Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness on the way to the promised land after being liberated from slavery in Egypt.

And it's on this wilderness journey that the people of Israel too, figure out what it means to be God's chosen people - where the bondage of slavery are gone and instead trust in the God who delivered them is formed.

It's a place where God provides for them amidst the harsh elements and where God's presence is felt, but also a place that breeds worry and doubt amongst the people - will God truly provide?

Thus Jesus steps into the same wilderness, and encounters the devil at his weakest, famished from hunger, and tests what kind of Son will he be.

Will he trust God, feel God's presence, know that God will provide? And so the devil begins to test Jesus... and he offers him things that are all good - to see if even good things can lure his focus from God's will. What kind of Son will he be?

The first good thing: turn a stone to bread - it would satisfy his own real, desperate hunger. But it's also bigger than that - the implication is too, if he can turn this stone to bread, then surely he can feed Israel, all those who hunger.

But Jesus stays focused on God: trusting that perhaps God's mission for him, God's son, is greater than physical hunger alone.

The second good thing: power and authority over the kingdoms of the world, if he just worships the devil.

Here it's important to remember the context of Jesus' world.

During Jesus' time most of the known world was under the tight control of the oppressive Roman Empire - many of Christ's followers wanted him to overturn the oppressive Roman Empire and restore Israel.

And here he has the chance - but he says no. The price of power, even for good is too much. He stays focused on God.

Trusting that God's mission for him will overturn the kingdoms of the world not from worldly power, but perhaps something even greater.

The third and final good thing: God's protection.

The devil tempts Jesus to make God's provision for him made known; surely God would protect him from falling. Jesus says no. He trusts God's mission for him.

He does not need God to prove it. It's significant that this third and final test is in Jerusalem - where all the high priest and religious authorities are - fall down in front of them and shown them your authority as God's son. That God protects you. But God will not be tested. Even by God's Son.

At each and every temptation, we see Jesus figure out what it means for him to be the son of God.

To be the son of God is to be obedient to God, and not to the ways of the world. To trust God and God's plans for him: not use the world's tool to carry out his own. There he finds freedom.

For to say yes to the ways of the world would have required Jesus to say no to God, to the way of God, and to an idea of God's kingdom that his future followers simply did not understand.

That all too often we do not understand. And when he leaves the wilderness and begins his ministry, the ways of God prove to answer these tests in ways greater than offered by the devil.

He refused to turn stone into bread - but he feeds 5000 with 5 loaves and two fish.

He refused political power, but the proclamation of God's empire of Justice and Peace is the center of his preaching and teachings.

And though he refused to test God's protection and love for him - he goes to the cross knowing that not even death can stop God's love for him and this world.

So - this story - it's not really about the temptations, but Jesus' responses, and how they shape his identity as the son of God.

And they aren't really temptations for us - but the temptations for the spirit anointed son of God.

So then, what does this story mean for us? What is perhaps the most perplexing thing about this story is the role of the spirit. It is explicitly the spirit that leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

While the temptations are not the same, while we don't have to wrestle with what it means to be the son of God - that same spirit leads us, too.

And we would be naive to think all the places the spirit leads us are comfortable and pleasant places.

For it is in the wilderness that we see mostly plainly the choice between the ways of the world, and the ways of God.

To be obedient to God and trust God, or to use power to achieve our own means - even if we think they are for good.

While studying this scripture, while preparing for this sermon - there were one or two themes from this text that I was really wrestling with, having a hard time understanding or making sense of.

So I reached out to a dear friend of mine and shared the struggles I was having and asked him some questions and his opinion or read of it. And he shared and we had a good discussion.

And I felt I had some more clarity. Then, at the end of our conversation, he kind of casually said to me: "oh also, I'd add that the Jesus in the wilderness story, for me, was done on our behalf. God went into the wilderness so that even there we are not alone."

What does this mean for us? It means that even in the wilderness we're not alone.

That we're known and loved by the God who defeats temptation, so we can go confidently to all the places the spirit may lead us, knowing we can rely on God's strength in our weaknesses.

Maybe this story kicks off lent not as a lesson on how to resist temptation, but as a reminder of what we know from the cross: that the son of God died so that we might have life.

That the son of God goes into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for us, so that even there we are not alone.

From the very beginning - this has been his identity - that everything the son of God does - he does for us.

With that truth - let us follow the spirit into this 40 day journey into the wilderness, knowing God is with us each step of the way.

Amen.