

“Into the Wilderness” a sermon on temptation by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey  
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TEXT: Luke 4:1-13 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 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. The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.”’ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’ Then the devil 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, for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

WHEN MY DAUGHTER was about four years old, we were visiting her grandparents in New Jersey. I took her outside with me while I cut some roses for the house. Holding her hand, I knelt down so that we could look at each other face to face. Slowly and carefully I said, "Megan you can play here in the front yard by the steps. You can ride your new Big Wheel up and down the driveway. You can come into the side yard and help me cut roses.. but you can NOT go out into the street. It is very dangerous there. This is a new neighborhood. You cannot play in the street. Do you understand?" And Megan solemnly nodded her head. I let go of her hand and she ran straight to the curb, put one foot in the street, and then turned her head toward me and smiled, as if to say, "Foolish mortal!"

Right then and there, I knew something of the way God must have felt in the Garden of Eden.

What is there in our genetic makeup that seems to be drawn to the forbidden, that's preoccupied with whatever is denied to us, that ignores the tremendous amount of freedom we enjoy and instead focuses on the limitations of our lives and inevitably, almost instinctively, rebels against them? We certainly don't get that from studying the life of Jesus, do we? Does the devil make us do it, as we so often claim?

I don't think my rambunctious daughter was responding to the devil, either within or without; but I do think she exhibited that side of each of us that is self assertive, ego-centric, rebellious, even arrogant. It's the human tendency to push limits. It is also the side of us that gets us in trouble, that takes the easy way out, that trades what we really want for what we want in the moment. When we dwell in immediate reactive behavior, we narrow our vision and our opportunity, we cut ourselves off from community and from God, from authentic joy and from outreach and service.

Certainly I've been there, like most of us. My life, has had its share of wilderness, from an alcoholic home, to spousal abuse, to my own addictions, to divorce, to deaths of parents. To my shame and regret, I have responded to many these with a rejection of God, with a reach toward something or someone else, with despair or rebellion. But I got here today because, like you, every time I've wandered in the wilderness, I've been brought through with new strengths, new understandings, new faith.—often despite myself.

Think about your own deserts? How did you navigate them?

Jesus found himself at this very cusp. Scripture says he was led to the wilderness by the Spirit – reminding us again, that God always, always uses wilderness times to our highest good, if we pay attention. The so-called temptations came to Jesus as inner reflections about how to do what he now perceived his divine mission to be.

Three times the devil set up choices for Jesus. In each instance, the tempter offered self-serving possibilities. Jesus was hungry; the devil suggested he create bread for himself, put his comforts first. Jesus had just found out that he was God's beloved Son; the devil invited him to grab hold of all the worldly power with an authority fueled by the devil rather than the Holy One. Jesus was called to exert authority, to be visible and attract followers. The devil told him to test God by jumping off the pinnacle of the temple in a superman display of shock and awe. The devil played on Jesus' strengths and also on Jesus' doubts. Jesus could serve himself at this cusp time, or he could serve God. Indeed, the temptations were not to do evil, but to do good by questionable means. A far more cunning, baffling, powerful challenge!

The word temptation means presenting of an attraction so strong that it overcomes the restraints of conscience or better judgment. Jesus resisted. It means leading astray or often by artful or adroit means. Jesus saw through misleading cleverness. It means enticement to do wrong by the promise of pleasure or gain. Jesus saw the difference between the ends and the means; he redefined that word gain by God's standards, not by the world's standards. It means to lead astray from one's true course. In the desert, Jesus found the clarity and conviction of his true course, and set his sail accordingly.

What are our own temptations, and what is our true course?

My own particular temptation over recent years has been telling lies. I once told a checkout cashier in the supermarket that I had 7 children –It just felt that way at the time! I used to tell elaborate stories to make me feel better, or to make me seem more interesting, or to get myself off the hook. Even now, it is so tempting to say “the bridge traffic was awful” rather than “I overslept – sorry I kept you waiting.”

I have learned that there is no such thing as an inconsequential lie, and that if I feel the need to make up a story, I am better off changing my actions so I don't need the excuse to begin with! I want an authentic life. Jesus calls me to an authentic and responsible life, lived in full embrace, not in denial. The means does not justify the end.

This week we heard the "confession" of Tiger Woods who said he came to feel entitled to his behaviors. Nurtured by flattery and attention from the age of 2 (when he was televised playing golf with Bob Hope) I suppose his seemingly magical, spectacular feats at numerous golf tournaments could be likened to the magical, spectacular act of jumping from a pinnacle. Within the façade of his tightly controlled image, he lost his bearings, he believed his own hype, his own invincibility. Time will tell whether he allows his wilderness to bring redemption.

Another "confession" was slugger Mark McGuire's admission that indeed, for years he used steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs. Is it real or simply reaction to the seduction of a job as batting coach of a major league team? Again time will tell which Higher Power McGuire is choosing.

Temptation lurks all around us. We want to save our environment, but not if it is inconvenient. We want people to like us so we avoid telling hard truths or taking unpopular stands. We want corporations with integrity, but we want cheap goods and pretty products and high stock values. Our Olympic athletes compete in fellowship and harmony, yet the drive to "Own The Podium" causes anger and bitterness. Four years ago one snowboarder lost her chance at the gold because she succumbed to the temptation to show off before she'd even landed. Our senators and representatives are called public servants, yet political power and personal greed have blinded so many of them.

We may have to empty ourselves even of our attachment to our hopes, our expectations, our desired outcomes; our comforts, our foibles. Sometimes we have to say *not this* to what we have most treasured, in order to make way for what truly belongs.

As we enter into the landscape that is the season of Lent, what's stirring in your own interior terrain? Is there a wild space—inner or outer—that would help you choose what you need for a more whole life?

In Romans, Paul is clear about the source of meaning and integrity for living. Our guide in decision making is the Authority of Jesus. Claiming Jesus as Lord is the most complex yet simple thing we can ever do, for it affects our whole lives. Paul joins the confession of the mouth with the belief of the heart. We might describe it as being and doing, that our actions match our values. Christians often define our religion as a moral code where everyone knows what's expected of them and follows the rules. Jesus didn't buy that approach, and neither should we. Christianity is not about norms and boundaries of behavior. It's about a profound kindness and respect and service and grace that insists we are all in this mad mess of life together.

Remember the movie, *Chocolat*? The young priest says "We must measure our goodness, not by what we don't do, what we deny ourselves, what we resist, or who we exclude. Instead, we must measure ourselves by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include."

The basic, underlying temptation that Jesus shared with us is the temptation to treat God as less than God. We may not be tempted to turn stones into bread--but we are constantly tempted to mistrust God's readiness to empower us to face our trials. None of us is likely to put God to the test by leaping from a cliff, but we are frequently tempted to question God's helpfulness when things go awry; we forget the sure promise, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (II Corinthians 12:9). Pagan idolatry is no more a temptation for us than it was for Jesus, but compromise with the ways of the world is a continuing seduction.

Resisting temptations might mean simply trusting God. God will give us the strength and the wisdom to make the choices that aren't easy, choices that require character and courage, rigorous honesty and self-giving generosity.

The devil doesn't make us do anything! The devil didn't make my young daughter defy me, and the devil didn't make me do drugs or lie or harbor resentments or seek outside affirmations. Megan ended up not running into the street. And I ended up overcoming destructive habits. We each looked to a higher power. Megan loved and trusted me more than she needed independence or rebellion. And I came to love and trust God more than I needed my independence or my delusions of power or comfort.

Then and now, God accepts and uses me just the way I am. For that I am grateful. And because of it every time I am led to a wilderness or a desert, I come through with new understandings and a new faith.

May it be so for you as well.

Amen