

Going Deep in Wilderness Temptation

A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman

Luke 4:1-13

February 25, 2007

(This manuscript was created from the audio tape of the sermon)

I find myself feeling a little anxious – it is the first Sunday in Lent. And I often say to you on the first Sunday in Lent that, these next six weeks, every Sunday I will probably offend somebody. Because we're not quite sure what we believe about this journey we are on.

We're not quite sure what to do with the texts we are going to be reading. We're not quite sure what to do with a text that talks about evil – like this one does today. Not quite sure what to do with the symbol of the cross.

So we're walking on holy ground ... again.

Some of you tell me “I don't want to come to church during Lent. It's too hard. I've been beat up too much by the church, telling me how bad I was, how I didn't live up to this or that. “

Others of us have learned that Lent is a very important time of the year. A very important time to go deep inside of ourselves again, and to connect at that deep place with God. And with Spirit. Some of us have learned how to weave the old messages and the new possibilities together in order to find some kind of hope.

The truth is that Lent is hard. Lent requires us to work. And so it's appropriate that on the first Sunday of Lent every year the gospel lesson is the story about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. It's told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They're all similar, but each adds their own nuances. Today we have read the story from Luke's gospel, and Luke makes a lot of connections with the Spirit. That sense of Spirit is going to run from the very beginning of the gospel all the way to the end and into the book of Acts – where the Spirit is given to the church at Pentecost.

Jesus was born by the presence of the Spirit of God at Bethlehem through a woman named Mary. Jesus was baptized, and the skies opened up and a dove descended and a voice spoke saying: “This is my Child with whom I am well pleased.” And in that experience, Jesus was called and claimed by the Spirit. And filled up by that Spirit, and it is that same Spirit that now sends Jesus into the wilderness and into the wilderness of temptation and the presence of that which is evil.

We need to remember that it is by the Spirit that Jesus goes to this place.

I want us to think for a few minutes about this journey we're on between now and Easter, as we move towards Jerusalem, as we move towards the symbol of this cross, a little closer each week. And I want us to remember that it begins here in this wilderness experience of temptation. A lot of us grew up, and a lot of us still hear that Jesus came, that God sent Jesus to earth to die for our sins. For many of us that theological interpretation is troublesome and problematic. That God would have to send someone to be sacrificed for us because we can't get it right by ourselves.

There are a lot of theories about how this story can be interpreted, but as we begin in this wilderness experience today, on the first Sunday in Lent, what I want to invite you to do, is very much what the worship committee is inviting you to do – in the insert each week a spiritual discipline that they are going to suggest – and I want to invite us to re-imagine the story and find ourselves in this story. If Jesus comes for the sole reason of helping us to be saved, if Jesus' purpose was to die for us, then it seems to me that it diminishes our part in the story. And I think, what Jesus came to do is to live his life the very best that he could. To live into the purpose and calling of who he was and is to us. And so, Jesus struggled with the things that got into the way for him. The desire for power. The desire to eat right then and there because he was hungry. And so on.

So, that which is evil is really that which gets in our way of living into the wholeness and fullness and grace that God wants us to experience. And so Jesus has to get real with himself and figure out what is it in me that gets in the way of my living into this, because I am called to model this for everyone else to follow. And those of us who seek to live in the ways of Jesus are called also to our places of temptation. To name for ourselves what it is that gets in our way of being the very best that God has created us to be. How can I live the most loving and just life possible? How can I have the courage when I come toward Jerusalem and I stand up against the powers that be, how can I have enough conviction inside of me, enough strength to hold on to what is just and righteous? That's what we do in the wilderness of temptation. We pray for God to help us name what gets in the way and to help us name that in a way that gives us strength and courage to not let it be our hindrance.

We are called to live into a life of wholeness and grace and love. And yet all of us at times feel broken, knocked down, we feel we can't get it right. And what happens I think is that we begin to close ourselves off, we put that hurt in a box and we hide it away because we don't want to feel it again. So we wrap it up and make sure it can't get out again. And yet, it is the opening of the box, it is the opening of our truth and our brokenness and our struggle and our saying to God "Here I am God. Help me to heal so that as I walk this journey with you and with others, we can be a people who creates life as you imagine it for everyone. "

I want to invite you into the wilderness. I want to invite you to come there, filled up with the Spirit of Epiphany, filled up with the many ways that God has come and filled us, and with that Spirit already in us, I invite you to open up the box inside as much as you can. I invite you to find a healing this Lenten season.

We come back to it every year. Because every year we keep running into something else. We have to start over again. Jerene read it very well in this text. At the end of the three temptations the devil departs “until the next *opportune time*.” It isn’t victory, it isn’t over, but that will come later. For now, whenever we close ourselves back off, whenever we’re not willing to honestly look at what’s in our way, what’s breaking us, what’s holding us back, that’s the opportune time to fall apart again. To forget who we are. To lose our way.

I wish I could make it easy for us. I will say that I think it is full of joy. And I think if you ever go deep and find that inside of you, you will experience what I am talking about. We’re on a journey to Jerusalem. We know what’s ahead. We have been gifted with God’s spirit to walk our way, to find our way, and it is enough. It is especially enough when we do it with each other. So in this Lenten season, be of good courage. Let the Spirit dance in you. Listen to the rhythm of the music. Pay attention to Earth under our feet. Have the courage to go deep again and find the you that God calls forth ... again. Amen.