

Seekers, Sinners, Saints: Profiles in Faith

1. He Was Tempted

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Matthew 4:1-11

The desert wilderness of Israel/Palestine is a foreboding region, even today. Virtually uninhabitable, it features temperature extremes both hot and cold, very little water or vegetation, venomous snakes and creatures, and mountain lions. Yet this is the region to which Jesus “was led” by the Holy Spirit as a kind of proving ground before he initiates his ministry. The narrative of his time there, highlighted by experiences of deprivation and testing is the gospel reading for the first Sunday of Lent. I’ve always been intrigued by that choice, because it seems counterintuitive (and counterproductive!) to encourage the faithful to journey with Jesus but oh, by the way, you’ll be starting in a wild and dangerous place where your life is threatened. *Lead us **not** into temptation!* -we pray. Part of me prefers to think of the journey of faith as an adventure, a path upon which truth and love and meaning are just waiting to be discovered. Here instead, we get the spiritual equivalent of boot camp....as if Jesus were preparing to go into battle.

....which is a sobering way to think about the role of faith in your life. But maybe not far off the mark. There is much in contemporary life that evokes struggle—and people speak routinely of “doing battle,” “facing lions” and even “just surviving.” We know real fears about economic health, global warfare and security, our children’s future. Are the spiritual resources we possess adequate to meet these daily challenges? I hear many of us wondering about that. For some, the Sunday School religion of our early years has gradually faded as a potent source of guidance. Some of us have barely cracked a Bible since confirmation. We see how Christian fundamentalism has hijacked theological concepts and a

posture of openness and humility to the extent that we barely recognize what once provided a solid foundation for value formation and purposeful practice. We no longer know what authentic Christianity looks like—or acts like. And then there's the simple fact that we're too busy even to pray, even to think, even to worship regularly. Many, many of us cope with our uncertainty about transcendent things by filling up our lives with material things, anesthetizing us to our true condition. A recent *Plain Dealer* column posted readers' response to the question, *What do you do to beat the gloom in Cleveland?* And who could fault the practical spirituality of the person who responded "I pray the Rosary...and then look forward to our upcoming vacation in sunny Las Vegas!"

No less a theologian than the late, great Mister Rogers acknowledged, "Honesty is often very hard. The truth is often painful. But the freedom it can bring is worth the trying" [*Fred Rogers, Life's Journeys According to Mr. Rogers, Hyperion, 2005, p. 98*] This Lenten season I propose we try---together, as a congregation---to discover or re-discover the truth of Christian faith, and how we might grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. In other words, to become seekers; to acknowledge that we don't know it all, and we're going to take some responsibility for finding out. For most if not all of us, this journey will require a little discipline, some mindfulness, and practice. It may be difficult at times. But it doesn't have to be a drudge! We'll take this journey in the company of others—persons with whom you'll worship, enjoy table fellowship on Wednesday evenings, pray, sing, or serve. And what freedom and joy in trying!

The sermon series examines the lives of biblical individuals who were seekers. We'll meet a man who questioned the truths he'd been taught his whole life; a woman whose search for love had left her restless and isolated; another man who longed to see, to be healed from blindness, physically and spiritually; and two sisters who asked for a miracle on behalf of their gravely ill brother. None of these persons were especially spiritual; they were sinners, saints, and

seekers....just as we are. Their encounters with Jesus model the way faith illumines our complex lives, and help us become open to growth. To be a seeker is to admit one's need, but it is also to consent to a certain vulnerability, to risk the unknown. The seeker is motivated by restlessness, hunger, fear to leave the comfortable and familiar in order to find something more. To highlight our intention to seek, we will forego reciting an "affirmation of faith" following the sermon each week, until Easter Sunday. Instead, we'll engage in some type of spiritual practice—prayer, meditation, journaling, and such—to experience the variety of ways Jesus speaks to us.

Are we ready to go into the wilderness? The Bible says Jesus was led there, and you have to wonder if he went willingly or with apprehension. What did he expect to find? And how would the experience shape him for all that loomed just over the horizon, out of sight? What might it mean for us contemporary Christians and the testing that characterizes so much of our daily lives? Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the fourth chapter at the first verse.

[MATTHEW 4:1-11]

*Lead us not into temptation.....*the petition in the Lord's Prayer has always prompted questions about God's good intentions for humanity. It sounds as if God needs to be entreated *not* to entice us to sin. But perhaps that stems from an understanding of temptation focused primarily on its invitation to make a wrong choice: to eat the dessert, to calculate a little more advantageously toward one's own self-interest, to flirt with possibility.

By contrast, Jesus' wilderness temptation seems more a period of testing which helped clarify his sense of identity and purpose. The Church has long understood the value of wilderness times. There our spiritual forebears sought to discern God's will through the solitude and stripped-down landscape of the desert. Even now, when the world is too much with us, we seek "to get away from it all," to escape from

routine and recover balance, to refocus and sharpen priorities, to find peace and clarity. When it was time for Jesus to make the transition from carpenter to what God had in store for him, the Spirit led him into the wilderness. Each year the Church begins its Lenten journey there, as if to place ourselves where God can get our attention. Christian author Tony Campolo expresses it as our need for a passionate faith. “Instead of praying ‘If I should die before I wake,’” he writes, “we should pray ‘Lord, wake me up before I die!’”

The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where the testing he faced awakened him to his destiny. What strikes me about the particular temptations is that none of them were inherently wrong or evil. It’s good to seek food when hungry. It’s good to have the power to bring about change. It’s good to be protected from threat and danger. Bread, politics and religion: you can’t find more basic and infinitely ambiguous sources of temptation. The Tempter doesn’t always wield evil to thwart God’s intent; often we find ourselves tempted by something good used in the service of evil. In our text, succumbing to any of the temptations would mean that Jesus had given up his sole allegiance to God. Other things would have taken precedence over his relationship to his Father. Jesus’ need for bread, for power, for protection was secondary to his need for trust in God alone, who provides them all.

In the wilderness, Jesus resisted the temptation to be something other than who he was created and called to be. We will face versions of the same temptation as well. To become “like God” is to reject our human-ness. To try and be more than human is to end up being less than human, to settle for so much less than God intends for us. We are sustained in the wilderness first by remembering who—and Whose—we are. This bedrock truth frees us to journey, to leave home and grow up. But I suspect we need to be reminded again and again.

Author Anne Lamott’s faith journey has been told well in her book *Traveling Mercies*. Raised in a family of intellectual agnostics in the turbulent sixties, she describes how she lost

her way, spiraling downward into drug and alcohol abuse and profound loneliness. She began attending a small Presbyterian Church, drawn there, she says, by the singing, and by the open-hearted welcome she received from members who seemed to cherish her even in her confusion. Her most recent book, *Grace (Eventually)*, continues the story of her growing faith, now as a church member and Sunday School teacher to four-and- five-year-olds. She describes teaching a Sunday School class on a day when she was feeling particularly vulnerable to the worries and losses for which there seem to be no good explanations or assurances. After welcoming the youngsters, and separating the “known offenders,” they launched into a game called “Loved and Chosen.”

I sat on the couch and glanced slowly around in a goofy, menacing way, and then said, “Is anyone here wearing a blue sweatshirt with Pokemon on it?” The [kid] looked down at his chest, astonished to discover that he matched this description—like, What are the odds? He raised his hand. “Come over here to the couch,” I said. “You are so loved, and so chosen.” then I asked if anyone that day was wearing green socks, a Giants cap, an argyle vest? Each of them turned out to be loved and chosen, which does not happen so often. My Jesuit friend Tom once told me this is a good exercise because in truth, everyone is loved and chosen. . . .This ---more than anything else—does not make sense to me.

Nor to us, either. But this is the essence of grace, the very heart of God. It is what saves us, not from life’s testing, but from despair that we will never pass the test. Our seeking may very well lead us into the wilderness, where we struggle with complex choices, tragic conditions, questions that are not readily answered, if at all. Like gold refined by high heat, so may our faith be strengthened through trial. The Lenten wilderness invites us to acknowledge our vulnerability—life is both precious and precarious. But we have a friend in Jesus, who went there too, and prevailed because he remembered that he was loved and chosen.

The theological message is reinforced in that last sentence of the text, where it says that angels came and ministered to Jesus. Were they heavenly messengers? –or did they have a distinctly human touch—offering an outstretched arm, a welcoming embrace, a hot meal? If you saw the film “Into the Wild” you recall that the seeker’s death came finally through isolation. The journey of faith is not meant to be taken alone. Wilderness is finally made bearable by the presence of others, companions both human and divine. May we walk together, following where the Spirit leads.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD’S GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

Did you notice in the text how Jesus countered the devil’s tempting offers with Scripture? God’s Word provides bread to sustain us every day, whether in routine and in crisis. I invite you to take one of the Lenten devotional guides being distributed. Together, can we make a commitment to use these guides daily? To create a space for scripture reading and prayer? To listen for God’s voice, above competing voices in our culture: to seek what God is calling us individually and as a church to do and to become.

