

Tested or Tempted
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Tempted or Tested
Luke 4:1-13

I don't know if you have had a wilderness experience in your life.

During these wilderness times in our lives we spend time wrestling with who we are, what we are doing, or where we are going. It can happen when someone we love is in the hospital, or when facing a divorce, retirement, death of a spouse or being laid off from work. Or maybe just a long night of the soul where we feel lost and alone.

When I graduated from college, I spent two and a half months walking the Appalachian Trail. It was definitely a wilderness time as I tried to sort out my parents' imminent divorce, my somewhat tumultuous college experience, and real uncertainty about what I was going to do next, how I felt God directing my life, and whether or not I was going to answer the call to ministry.

And so I literally walked in the wilderness.

The Interim time in the life of a church is perhaps best imagined as a time spent in the wilderness. And now The season of Lent gives us an opportunity to explicitly look at this wilderness experience and the time we are spending here.

When we are in wilderness. We are:
Not sure exactly where we are going
Not sure when we will get there
Not sure who will be leading us when we arrive

A lot of wandering around happens and some difficult conversations and decisions occur as we wrestle with ourselves, our history, and what brings us to this place.

Today we squarely look at temptation and testing, the experience of Jesus at the end of his time in the wilderness, and how this might speak to the temptations that face a congregation when in the wilderness.

First, let me clear something up about the role of the devil in this story.

The Devil is portrayed in the Bible in several different ways. In the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, the devil was seen as a tester, one who would test a person to see what they were made of. One who put a person through a time of struggle as a test to see what would happen.

In Job, there is the person of the tester, sometimes called devil, who agrees to test Job. God agrees with tempter to take Job's stuff away and see if Job still praises God. While the scenario is distasteful as we think of God telling the tempter to do it, it is not without God's permission. The two are having a friendly wager almost.

That is how devil seen. The tester. To see what we are made of as people. To see what our faith is made of. We are tested.

Not until much later that we get the idea of the devil that we have today--red with horns and pointy tail and pitchfork. Most of what we think we know about the devil comes from Milton's Paradise Lost, Dante's Inferno and the horror movie genre, not from the Bible.

So today Jesus is driven out into the wilderness by the tempter, by the tester, and stays out there for forty days. What's he doing out there?

Trying to decide what to do with his life I think. He's been alone, perhaps feeling lost or even literally lost, he's wrestling with the words from his baptism, God saying "this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased."

Now what? Thinking, praying, meditating...Jesus knows he has power, insight into people, the blessing of God. He could do anything. But what should he do? What does it mean to follow the hard path of living into the call of God and radical love for all people?

What does it mean to you, Pilgrim Church, to all of you who come here to live into the call of God and radical love for all people? Especially as you wait and wait for the "real" pastor to show up?

Well, there are temptations when Jesus comes out of the wilderness. Or better, he is tested when he comes out of the wilderness.

I am reminded of a story says that, "As the Union Pacific Railroad was being constructed, an elaborate trestle bridge was built across a large canyon in the West. Wanting to test the bridge, the builder loaded a train with enough extra cars and equipment to double its normal payload. The train was then driven to the middle of the bridge, where it stayed an entire day. One worker asked, "Are you trying to break this bridge?" "No," the builder replied, "I'm trying to prove that the bridge won't break."

Ah, you see testing is to see if something will hold. Then we have confidence in it. Jesus, being tested, will find out if he is strong enough, and if so, will have the confidence to walk forward into a difficult ministry. But first he has to engage the tests.

And so we are seeing how Pilgrim church holds in times of struggle and challenge and conflict. Can we become the healthy church that will not break, and love each other so relationships don't break, in tough times, heavy times?

So Jesus is out there and when the days are over he is famished (as one would be). And the tempter, the tester, comes to him with three challenges.

The First Test:

"Aren't you starving Jesus. Turn these stones into bread. I know you want to. Try it."

And Jesus says, no. We don't live by bread alone.

Jesus was faced with a physical need. He was hungry. He could just make up a sandwich. But Jesus also knows that in the case bread is not just bread. This is about how one decides to make a decision, to fill a need, to deal with a problem. Does he pick the easy way, Shazam!, a loaf of bread. Or does he think about the bigger picture, the bigger goal, the role of God in his life? For this time it is bread, what will it be next time? Jesus chooses the harder way rather than immediate satisfaction or instant gratification.

We know this temptation in the Interim time. Why can't we just go get a pastor right away? Let's just get it done, no muss, no fuss. Practical, timely. Efficient.

But where is God? Pilgrim's future is not made of a pastor alone. Filling the pulpit and the pastor role is the quick fix, but if a church chooses to skip the hard work of looking at the needs for health and healing among its members, and the need to understand its community, and the work of listening for God's presence, God's call, here...well, it will end up with efficient. And it will be much easier in the short run.

But as Beverly Sills, the singer was known to say, "There are no shortcuts to any place worth going."

Have you heard about the marshmallow test? Kids three years old are given a marshmallow and told that if they wait 15 minutes to eat it, they will get two marshmallows. Then the researcher leaves the room. It's a way to test kids' ability to delay gratification and it is remarkably accurate in being able to forecast success in kids' future. I think it is just as apt a test for adults or congregations. Instant gratification or delayed gratification?

And so how shall we respond when tempted by bread, the quick solution, "just get it done already" as we spend time here in the wilderness?

The Second Test:

The tester takes Jesus up to a high peak. He can see everything and the tester says, You can have it all Jesus. Just bow down and worship me and you've got it.

So easy, so tempting. To have all that power. All that control. Jesus could take care of the Romans and their domination, could restore the Temple, could fix everything, could keep everything neat and in place and orderly. Yes!

But Jesus declines. "Worship God and only God."

We are tested by this power, too. One of the interim tasks for the congregation is looking at leadership. Who is able or even allowed to lead the church, to be in leadership? What kind of informal power dynamics are present? Are new people invited or ask to truly lead and share ideas and ways of doing things?

It is so tempting to hold on to how things have been done. To say no to new ideas that might cause conflict. To keep the peace at any price. To make sure we have control over things because we don't want to risk losing anything else, especially if we are coming out of a vulnerable place, a time when we lost a pastor, and we lost good friends, members.

To hold on tight. Keep control. To bow down to power instead of to God.

But perhaps in thinking about Jesus' response to this temptation we might reflect on leadership among sandhill cranes: these are giant, awkward birds who migrate each year.

"These large birds, who fly great distances across continents, have three remarkable qualities. First, they rotate leadership. No one bird stays out in front all the time. Second, they choose leaders who can handle turbulence. And then, all during the time one bird is leading, the rest are honking their affirmation."

What might that look like? How can we reflect on that in the interim time? That as we are tempted to clamp down, to control all things, we think about allowing new ideas and new ways, and not just standing back to see if they succeed or fail. But honk our affirmation. How is your honking, Pilgrim Church?

The Third Test:

Finally, and most powerfully, the tester tells Jesus, “throw yourself off into the air. God will send angels to catch you. Right?”

This test catches me right in the gut. Because at its heart the tempter is saying, “have God prove that God loves you. Do you have any doubt about that?”

As flawed, partially broken and yet infinitely amazing human beings, we are tempted, so tempted, to test whether we are loved. We ask our spouses, our children, to prove they love us. Because our insecurity gets right to the heart of who we are, and what we most fear. That we are not loved, not lovable, or not wanted. This is deep stuff.

During the interim time a more individual task is to face the temptation of having the church prove it loves us. Does the church, does the congregation, love and value me?

We come to church with hopes, and needs, and wants. That is normal. And necessary. But what happens when those needs or wants are not met in the way we expect?

What happens when the pastor does not visit us or our loved one as many times as we want?

What happens when our request for mission funding is not chosen?

What happens when leadership takes us in a direction we don't care for?

What happens when the pastor-type we have in our imagination--a young dad with kids, an older woman with experience, a Hispanic woman with conflict management experience, a fantastic preacher---What happens when the pastor-type we want, even long for, is not who is ultimately chosen?

What happens when we have a loss and no one in the church responds?

Or when our feelings are hurt because of a difficult conversation or just plain meanness on the part of another member?

We are tempted to say, well, the church doesn't value me, doesn't want me, doesn't ever give me what I want. Because I gave the church the chance to prove it. And it failed.

We will get hurt at church. It is a human institution. There will be times we do not get what we want. The church is a group-led institution that thinks about the whole. There will be times when mistakes are made. And revelations about past times of hurt come out in the interim time especially.

Do we choose to make these a litmus test of the church: “do you love me church, then prove it.”

What is at the center of each of Jesus' temptations is his relationship with God. Jesus turns to God each time he is tempted or tested. He leans on God. He trusts God. He holds up God's directives about love and life and faith.

This is not to say Jesus wasn't tempted. Of course he was. He was human just like us. It's just that Jesus knew what to do. Put God first. Listen to God.

And that is our task in both Lent and this Interim time. To listen to God. To put God first. To find God here at Pilgrim Church. And to follow what God tells us and shows us through the life of Jesus to bring that presence of God, that healing and wholeness and focus on the ministry we are called to as the focus in this place.

May Jesus travel with us in this wilderness time, and give us both direction and strength. Amen.