

“The attitude you should have,” Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi, “is the one that Christ Jesus had: He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to become equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant.... He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death — his death on the cross...” (Philippians 2:5-8, edited)

The Gospel of Mark has the most abbreviated report of Jesus’ baptism and time in the wilderness. In fact, Mark gives only two brief verses about Jesus’ period of temptation: “At once the Spirit made Jesus go into the desert, where he stayed forty days, being tempted by Satan. Wild animals were there also, but angels came and helped him.”

Each year, on the first Sunday in Lent, the lectionary Gospel reading has to do with Jesus’ after-baptism time of being tempted in the wilderness. For forty days and forty nights, he was in the wilderness desert without anything to eat, all alone except, Mark tells us, for wild animals, angels who helped him (we don’t know how), and, once he was good and hungry, the devil.

Matthew and Luke make no mention of any wild animals, and Matthew has the angels minister to Jesus only after all the temptations are finished. Luke has the devil tempting Jesus during those forty days, but Matthew says it was after Jesus had spent forty days and nights without food that the devil came to challenge him. Gospel-writer John does not tell of this at all. (Matthew 4 and Luke 4)

All three agree that, right after his baptism by John the Baptist, God’s Spirit led Jesus into a time of testing and decision. It’s interesting that God apparently let the devil administer the test. Be sure to note that Jesus didn’t simply walk into the wilderness by mistake, but was led there in order that he might have this forty-day exam.

Matthew’s suggestion that it was after Jesus was hungry and weak that the devil tried to get to him makes a lot of sense. After Jesus had dealt with wild animals and the intense loneliness of a desert as well as with hunger, he would surely have been vulnerable to the devil’s suggestions. Since Gospel-writer Mark didn’t bother to write the specifics of the test, we will look at Matthew’s version (Chapter 4) to see what went on. “*If* you are the Son of God...” The devil started by calling into question the very identity proclaimed at Jesus’ baptism: “You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you.” (Mark 1:11)

Imagine: “You know, if I really am God’s Son, why am I out here so hungry and miserable? If I am God’s Son, surely I can cause the stones to become bread, surely I can have a better life — even kingdoms — than I am having now...Surely I can call on God to keep me from ever getting hurt...”

The devil challenged Jesus on each of these ideas. Famished, weak, miserable, Jesus refused to accept the easy way out, refused to take up power offered him through the devil instead of through the will of his heavenly Father. Each time the devil tempted him, using scripture, Jesus replied with more scripture to refuse and refute the devil’s temptation.

Most of us know this story, since we've heard it every single year for years. But what does it have to say to us? Perhaps it prompts us to think of our *own* times of wilderness temptation, times when we feel hungry or weak or pushed beyond our own endurance levels in life, when we wonder where God is and whether God even remembers who we are... "I am hurting, struggling, having a terrible time," you may cry, "so why doesn't God do something to get me out of this situation?"

If you have felt this way, you can probably touch the way it was for Jesus in the wilderness. He'd just been declared "beloved Son," but there seemed to be no special treatment, no benefits to this role, at all. Indeed, he went from the spectacular moment of his baptism "to a long, lonely time in the wilderness, during which he may have wondered if he had imagined the whole thing. For forty days and forty nights there was no sign of God at all. The sky stayed shut. There were no doves. No voice from heaven spoke reassuring words. There was just Jesus, the desert, and finally, the devil." All along, the devil subtly suggested that Jesus deserved better than God was giving him. Why should the Son of God be famished? Why should he so much as stub his toe or be subject to the Roman government when it should be subject to him? "If God could not do better than that for his Son, the devil suggested, then maybe Jesus should start shopping around for another father."

(Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, p. 38-39)

How many times have we known folks who have felt the same way, or felt it ourselves? "I'm trying to live a decent life, but look at all the things that have fallen apart in my life!! What good is it to be a Christian if there are no tangible benefits? Why does God let me have cancer? Why did God let my son get so badly hurt in the accident? How could God let that company lay me off when my family needs money so badly? If I am loved by God, why is my life so hard?" We often feel as though we are lost in a wilderness.

Today's lesson of Jesus being tempted lets us in on what it really means to be the beloved Son of God. This is the story in which Jesus proves who he is NOT by taking up power rightfully his, but by turning it down. He will not practice magic to satisfy his own needs (turning stones into bread). He will not ask for special protection, special bodyguards to keep him from getting hurt, nor will he seek political power. Instead, he will live a human being, with all the risks and limitations. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor summed it up with these words: "A son of God is not someone who is related to God by rising out of his humanity, but someone who is beloved by God for sinking into it even when he is famished, even when he is taunted by the devil himself. **It is someone who can listen to every good reason in the world for becoming God's rival and remain God's child instead.**"

(*Bread of Angels*, p. 39)

The devil provides us with all sorts of wilderness choices. Tax time is approaching, and the devil may whisper in your ear, "It doesn't matter if you cheat old Uncle Sam a little. He doesn't need all that money this year anyway." Or perhaps it's that cable television you managed to acquire without paying for... "I'm smart enough to get it, so I don't need to pay for it." Or the stuff you "borrow" from work: "Everybody does it." Or, "My brother hurt me, so I'll never speak to him again!" There are choices, little and large, through which we decide to whom we really belong, whether we will follow Jesus and his way of making hard choices, or say, "You're right, devil... a little choice here, a little choice there... This doesn't matter." But it does matter. Ask Brian Williams of NBC News who messed up by stretching the truth.

Introducing the title to his book, *The Waiting Father*, German theologian Helmut Thielicke showed the most useful way for each of us to read the Bible. A father himself, Thielicke shared this story: "Several years ago I set my little son down in front of a large mirror. At first he did not recognize himself because he was still too young. He quite obviously enjoyed seeing the small image that smiled at him from this glass wall. But all of a sudden the expression on his little face changed as he began to recognize the similarity between the motions and suddenly one could see it in his face: 'That's me!!'"

As we go through the weeks of Lent which will lead us to Easter I hope we can read the Bible stories and watch the struggles and reactions and mistakes of God's children all along the way, and recognize ourselves: "That's me! It is my story, too."

Yes, life can be tough, and discouraging. You may be famished for hope and a sense of power right now and wondering how you will make it through tomorrow. There are surely many troubles in life over which we have no control and therefore no choice except whether or not to trust God.

Shootings, storms, abductions, terrorism, bitter cold... Whatever our day presents, we have the choice of trusting God or not. We read Psalm 25 a few minutes ago: "To you, O Lord, I lift my soul. O my God, in you I trust... Make me to know your ways...teach me your paths." To trust can be our choice and our POWER.

Life is a wilderness. I close by repeating the challenge offered by Barbara Brown Taylor: "A son of God is someone who can listen to every good reason in the world for becoming God's rival and remain God's child instead." (*Bread of Angels*, p. 39) May our choices reflect our identities as God's children! Amen.