

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS: TEMPTATION; 2.21.10/ LENT I; THY/WPC

We begin two journeys today: our Lenten journey to Holy Week and Easter and our journey with Jesus through the hills of Galilee to Jerusalem and the cross. Having just returned from Israel with members of Westminster and Temple Beth Zion, I'd like to use our trip as a backdrop for these Lenten sermons.

Consider the terrain: descending from Jerusalem to Jericho toward the Dead Sea we lifted our gaze westward to see the Mount of Temptation. An ancient monastery that marks Jesus' forty-day trial is spectacularly carved into the cliffs and sparkles like a jewel in the sunlight with its golden rooftop.

The wilderness beyond is not a vast expanse of sand and tumbleweed. It is a rocky, daunting zone of cliffs, caves and maze-like passages; people avoided the place, believing evil spirits ranged there, as well as predatory beasts – mountain lions in Jesus' day – and robbers as the story of the Good Samaritan reminds us.

The scene as a place of temptation is quite believable. Somehow, when we're in unfamiliar territory and alone – especially if there is the possibility of danger – the old flight or fight response kicks in. Either we look for a way to get out of our predicament or we stand our ground and meet the challenges head on. Jesus chose the latter today.

Few would debate that life tests each of us. That 16th century classic *Pilgrim's Progress* is based solely on this theme. The *Book of Job* poses suffering itself as the ultimate test of life and faith.

Today, Jesus meets the devil's temptations – all of which were based on Scriptural quotations – with his own Scriptural ammunition. This was not a war of bible quoting so much as Jesus revealing his confidence in God's protection as he recalled it from the biblical stories he knew so well.

The story of Jesus' trials reminds us that he was human. He felt temptation's lure and seduction as deeply as we do.

Therefore, a dual focus will help today – one upon Jesus as he moves through his wilderness ordeal and one upon ourselves to see if there is something in Jesus' experience we can use to face the moments that deflect us from our best selves.

Tiger Woods' apology Friday is timely. The great golfer fell to many temptations but the most deadly was thinking the rules no longer applied to him. He was clear that his sense of entitlement dislodged him from his spiritual values and Buddhist upbringing.

We see in Tiger perhaps a modern version of the status and wealth the devil promised Jesus if he switched his allegiance from God to Satan.

But Woods is also a reflection of the larger cultural forces that shaped him including the financial system that had its own melt down 18 months ago.

I increasingly see in the mainstream media admonitions to our leaders, to the citizenry in this country to wake up. The frequency of these warnings seems less alarmist and more like a true crossroads. How is it we are so consistently led astray, as a nation, as institutions, as individuals?

One more editorial comment: before the 20th century, secular leaders periodically called for national revivals of recommitment to Christian spiritual values. Such a plea, for much of the nation, would be untenable today.

But it may not be a stretch at all to acknowledge, in this most religiously pluralistic nation in the world, that the time may be right for any of us who are so inclined – which according to polls is most of us on any given day – to rediscover and recommit to the core principles of our faith, whichever of the great faith traditions that might be.

In other words, our society is going through a wilderness experience of its own. The richness and diversity of religious commitments among us is, I propose, a great, untapped resource for finding our way out of the collective spiritual wilderness in which we seem to be lost.

So what can we learn from Jesus today? Already we are learning that the way to enter a wilderness is to go with God. Jesus wasn't forced into the wilderness. Nor did he go blindly. He went, Luke tells us, immediately after he heard God's call in his baptism.

Today's story advises don't walk into the wilderness spiritually unprepared. Jesus was prepared in that he had just been baptized and was conscious of God's blessing his life and ministry.

Each one of us is blessed by God. Baptism is a sign that we belong to God and one another. If a church exists to do anything, it is to remind its members through congregational care and fellowship that despite our faults we are loved by God and supported by one another. Without that core sense of belonging and fellowship little else of substance will happen.

And this is one of the hallmarks of the Protestant Reformation – you and I do not and never will earn God's love and acceptance. It is freely given. And when we forgive each other we re-enact and reinforce God's forgiveness of us.

So one of the most elemental things we do here, in addition to serving the world, is to equip each other, through our care and community, to get through the wildernesses and temptations of life.

We do this in lots of ways. If we stop to realize it each of us here is surrounded by a spiritual network of good people. Like that friendly guy in a hard hat with a large crowd of people behind him in the Verizon commercial. He always shows up when a customer is trying to make a call. We might picture all the members of this congregation rallying behind us everywhere we go – especially in places where we feel out of touch with God. We're here to remind each other that God's signal gets through, that God is with us when we face life head-on.

But while this is true it takes us only so far. Finally, we are alone in the wilderness in the sense that only we can choose to face our temptation or run from it.

This balance between individual and community is a tension in the spiritual life.

With the support and help of the community behind us we have to jump into the deep end and sink or swim not unlike Jesus when he chose to go to the depths of human experience by entering his wilderness.

Here the work of Barbara Brown Taylor is helpful. She says nothing can fill that God shaped hole in our hearts but God herself. Yet, that doesn't stop us from trying to fill it – with food or material things or work, mostly things that aren't even intrinsically negative.

Taylor says, “To enter the wilderness is to leave those things behind, nothing is too small to give up. Even a chocolate bar will do. What is going on when you crave a chocolate bar?”

Are you hungry? Well, what is wrong with being hungry? Are you lonely? What is so bad about being alone? Try sitting with the feeling instead of fixing it with cravings and longings and see what you find out... Then tell the devil to get lost.”

And this is where our faith gains wings. Rather than trying to live safe and risk-free lives, when we start trusting God to guide and protect us we can embrace life for all its worth.

This is exactly what Jesus was doing when he went of his own volition, led by the Spirit, into the wilderness. He didn't fall into a trap, he wasn't led astray. He walked right into the wilderness with his eyes open.

The other alternative is to approach life wrapped in cotton. But if we listen to our hearts and to God we get clearer about our mission, about what God needs and wants us to do. Seldom is God's call heard without resistance from the world. Wherever people struggle to do the right thing, to work for justice, to make peace the world pushes back. This can be dangerous work for our old egos. But if we trust our new identity and God's calling we can move ahead into uncertain, even dangerous terrain.

We see this ‘connection to the holy purposes’ emboldening God's people all the time. We just saw the movie *Avatar*. If there is any doubt about the power and popularity of religious themes in 2010 this movie puts them to rest.

The animated cinematography is a work of art. It is a beautiful movie with a slightly simplistic plot. Yet, even so the hero of the story and the people he leads are grounded in God's purposes. In their most trying hour they trust that purpose to see them through overwhelming odds.

Despite its flaws the movie is right when it says if we trust God life becomes an adventure, takes on larger meaning, has momentous direction. Not because we are so important but because God's work is important.

It's possible to adopt such a daring attitude for each and every ordinary day. Where will God use me today? Where will I have to rely upon my faith today? For as ordinary as the days seem we are in a cosmic struggle against dark forces that threaten the planet.

Of course, the twist to Jesus' temptation and any serious temptation is being invited to define ourselves by compromising our allegiance to God.

This is how Satan tempts Jesus. Three times he seeks to dislodge Jesus' allegiance to God – each time for worthy reasons – what we might call good excuses. The subtleties of sin are so nuanced far from looking sinful they appear logical, reasonable, justified. I did it because: if no one knew about it, it wouldn't hurt anyone else; because he or she was unfaithful; because I didn't know what the future would hold I fudged the rules.

We don't have to be able to quote Scripture like Jesus to find our way out of such circumstances. But we do have to reaffirm our allegiance to God and then listen to our hearts. This was Tiger Woods' revelation when he said, "In my sense of privilege and entitlement I lost my way."

Thomas Merton said, "The devil is no fool. He can get people feeling about heaven the way they ought to feel about hell. He can make them fear the means of grace the way they do not fear sin. And he does so not by light but by obscurity; not by realities but shadows; not by clarity and substance, but dreams and fears."

When God created the earth God looked at what God had created and said, "It is good." We can trust our hearts and our connection to the earth and follow our instincts and faith – even when the odds are against us.

Today, we welcome new members into this community of faith. I can't think of a better time to reaffirm how important we are to one another;

I can't think of a better occasion to reaffirm the truth and timelessness of our faith and the mission God calls us to do;

I can't think of a better moment to say how much we matter to each other and what a difference this ministry makes to the world.

So if you are a new member today or a member of long standing, welcome, again, to the ongoing journey and adventure.

Western New York may not resemble the territory in and around the hills of Jericho. But the spiritual, emotional and mental terrain is exactly the same.

The best way to get through a lonely, even dangerous time is to remember your connection to God and to God's people; reaffirm that God has a purpose for your life; then live in the moment without the props and crutches of too much food or work or self-medication through drugs and alcohol. This nation and world, our families and communities need us now more than ever to be clear-headed and grounded in our core beliefs. Amen.