

Not Failing in the Wilderness

Sermon for Lent 1, Year A, 1 March 2020

Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-21; Matthew 4: 1-11

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+In the Name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. AMEN.

On this first Sunday in Lent we focus on Jesus' temptations. Here we see something beyond the human struggle to be good, to do the right thing. There's more to it than that! Instead, here's an opportunity to see what it is that we've become part of in baptism, to dwell on the family resemblance that we share with Jesus Christ, whose faithfulness is something we're being enabled to share. In the story of Jesus' temptations, we see one of us breaking through and remaining faithful where the rest of us have not—right back to Adam's original failure in Genesis, which reveals a problem for humanity that only Jesus could fix, as Paul testifies in our Epistle today: what has been lost in Adam is restored in Jesus Christ. And in this victory of Jesus, in the assurance that we belong to him, to the one whose faithfulness to God is reliable even if ours isn't, we can find

strength and encouragement for our own struggle to be faithful.

The important thing about today's Gospel is that these aren't just any temptations. For one thing it's important to notice where these temptations take place. They take place in the wilderness, in the desert, where the Son of God is sent for a symbolic period, involving the number forty. Once upon a time another Son of God was tempted in the wilderness, and failed the test. That Son of God was Israel itself, according to Old Testament accounts of Israel's testing for forty years in the desert.

The first temptation has to do with bread. Really, it's about a lack of trust in God, and it refers back to Exodus chapter 16. There, Israel complained that the God who had liberated them from slavery in Egypt had forgotten them, so God rained down bread from heaven to feed them in the wilderness. This was to teach them that we don't live by bread alone, as Deuteronomy chapter 8 puts it, but by God's promises—by every word from the mouth of God. And where God's people failed to trust in this way in the desert, so too we fail to trust—when the way forward in life is uncertain, when God's call is difficult to discern, when we feel hard done by, perhaps, and look for

comfort, or some reward for all our trouble. This is what the tempter put before Jesus, and this is what the tempter puts before us, making us complain, and forget our Godly priorities, and look out for number one—as if God’s care for us is an illusion. This is the temptation that leads to rorting the system and to corruption of all sorts. But where Israel failed to trust God’s promises, and where we fail, Jesus did not fail this test—he did not seek bread for himself; he did not rort the system; he trusted God’s purposes.

Next, there was the temptation for Jesus to throw himself down from the temple, not so much as a spectacle but for proof—proof that God’s promises were trustworthy (didn’t the Psalmist say that not even his foot would be dashed against the stone?). Putting God to the test is something Israel did at Massah in the wilderness, at Merribah where the thirsty Israelites complained to Moses and refused to believe, and insisted on a sign to confirm their faith, and were given water from the rock.

Now, we mustn’t misunderstand. The Gospels give us signs and wonders, but not for the reasons we might think. The signs and wonders aren’t so much a proof as a pointer. These miracle narratives point to Jesus and they’re meant to help us

understand who he is. But of themselves they are not proof. The fact that so many of his contemporaries didn't or wouldn't believe in Jesus, and crucified him, shows that there was no publicly accessible proof that convinced everyone. The sign that God gives us is of course Jesus himself, and the only way we confirm the truth of Jesus is by trusting in Jesus and looking to Jesus and giving ourselves to Jesus. And so in our living of the Christian life, through all the difficulties, false starts and uncertain moments—and on through the life cycle, with new dimensions revealing themselves in early adulthood, in midlife, in retirement and old age—in all of this uncertain journey, the proof comes in the living of it, not otherwise. But this mature Christian counsel is frequently too mature for us, and we put God to the test, insisting on something more certain—insisting on an infallible Christian leader, perhaps, or insisting on a bible that leaves no room for uncertainty, or expecting a personal religious experience that will banish all doubt.

I can't help thinking that the desire for complete certainty is at the root of a lot of human evil. Bigots and bullies and dangerous troublemakers of all sorts are often addicted to complete certainty. But the older and hopefully wiser I get, the more I sense that faith and prayer is about quiet conviction maybe, but not about the kind of certainty that I once sought

might have sought as a young adult. But Jesus trusts. Jesus doesn't accede to Satan's test of public verifiability that will remove all doubt. He knows this isn't the nature of God's working. Rather, God gives Godself to us in Jesus, and this frees us to give ourselves to others. This gift is the basis of faith, and whatever proof there is of the Christian pudding only comes in the eating.

Finally there was Satan's offer of lordship over the nations if only Jesus would worship him. What Israel had to learn during its wilderness wanderings was to get used to a place among the nations as God's witness, not in pursuit of their own power. Israel's special calling from God mandated a different way of being in the world. And so too with Christians and Churches down the ages and still today. We connive at all sorts of unholy alliances and enter all sorts of pacts with the devil for power and influence. But what of the one whose politics led to the cross, via the bloody sweat of Gethsemane? He handled this temptation differently. Jesus trusted God, demonstrating what St Paul called the power of God made perfect in weakness.

So today as we commence the Sundays in Lent, we look to Jesus who resisted the temptations that we often fail to resist. And in particular we recognize from the Old Testament that

where the Son of God, Israel, failed its big test in the wilderness, the new Son of God, Jesus, did not fail.

So, friends, we who are made one with Christ in his death and resurrection through our baptism aren't set a moral agenda to fulfil in our own strength, looking to a remote and elevated Christ who's out of our reach. Rather, we accept the embrace of the one to whom we belong, the one whose likeness is being formed in us through word and sacrament, and so we set about the task of Christian faithfulness from the inside, not from the outside. This is what our belief in the Holy Spirit means for us. It means that we're insiders to the life of Jesus Christ, not outsiders. And so in the Holy Spirit we look to Jesus. He is our religion, and our devotion. He is our Lenten discipline, and if we're to have a helpful Lent we'll remember that and not settle for anything trivial.

The Lord be with you...