

Sunday March 22, 2020
Lesson 4: Jesus in the Wilderness
Scripture: Matthew 4: 1-11

Context:

The next part of our focus on the wilderness moves us to the famous account of Jesus and the devil. After Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River, the Spirit moves him to go to the wilderness. For forty days and forty nights, Jesus fasts and is without a decent meal. By the end of it, he is hungry.

Along comes “the devil.” There is no physical description of him. A translation of the word “devil” is the Greek verb *peirazein*, which means “the tempting one.”¹ Yet the same word can be translated as “testing.” The translation means that the devil is one who testing Jesus as well as God made with the reference to the Spirit leading Jesus to the wilderness.² The devil, an indirect agent, seeks to *tempt* the Messiah as the Spirit intends to *test* Jesus.³ This encounter focuses upon God’s Son being tested and God’s ultimate purpose being revealed.

There are many allusions in this account to the Old Testament. There the reference to the “forty days and forty nights” of both Moses’ fast and the Israelites being in the wilderness for forty years.⁴ The three temptations in Matthew’s order recount three different trials faced by Israel.⁵ In each case Jesus overcomes the trial and serves as a foil to the Israelites.

The first temptation deals with the hunger Jesus faces. As the devil comes to him, he encourages Jesus to use his power as the Son of God to turn stones into bread. In this case, we are reminded of when the Israelites were in the wilderness and complained of the manna God sent to them.⁶ As a foil, Jesus shows the response of faithfulness of the Spirit feeding him and he resists temptation.

The second temptation involves Jesus honoring God by not putting God to the test. The Old Testament has multiple accounts of people testing God including the people saying God never did anything for them in the wilderness.⁷ Jesus will not manipulate God and abuse the power of God.

¹ Hare, Douglas R.A. “Matthew,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2010), 22.

² Ibid., 23.

³ Ibid., 23.

⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷ Ibid., 24. See Exodus 17: 1-7

The third temptation is idolatry as Jesus refuses to worship the devil. This reference to idolatry would have made sense to Matthew's first readers as the gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon were regarded by Jews as demons and seen as Satan's minions. Yet some caved as they wanted to be part of the Greco-Roman establishment.⁸ Jesus' loyalty is confirmed in serving God and God only.

Application:

Have you ever been in the wilderness before? If you have ever made a trip to any wilderness setting, you will notice a few things. I remember when I went to the Holy Land, I got to travel through the wilderness around the Dead Sea where Jesus and the Israelites roamed. As I remember my time on the bus, I remember noting some things about the wilderness.

The first thing is the barrenness of the land. In the wilderness, you go for miles without seeing a Comfort Inn or a Starbucks to refuel. All around you, there is nothing to eat and you realize how small you are in the grand scheme of things. The second thing you pick up on is how lonely it would be to roam in the wilderness. Whenever I would see a Bedouin wondering around, I couldn't help but imagine the loneliness if you were by yourself. Finally, in the wilderness there are all sorts of creatures. From annoying gnats to slithery snakes, there are all sorts of things in the wilderness to berate or harm you.

Yet Jesus went to the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. We assume he got water from a dirty stream, but there were no McDonalds to nourish him during his alone time. The real test comes from our good friend, the devil. The devil waits until Jesus is absolutely exhausted and then he goes after him.

The three temptations are all there each with the offer for Jesus to use his power as the Son of God. Jesus is given the opportunity to take control, to make a name for himself without the Father complicating things. However, Jesus stays the course and goes toe to toe with the devil. After the final temptation of idolatry, Jesus tells the devil where he can stick his offers and then passes out. Angels come to refuel him.

The story is about Jesus and yet the story is also about us. Every day we are tempted to do some of the same things in the wilderness. We complain to God until we get our way about things even when God sends us what we need. We are tempted to manipulate God with our conditions about if we will follow Jesus pending we always get our way. We are tempted to worship other things like wealth, success, or prestige if they can give us more of what we think we deserve. And the best part of all is that if we get caught, all we have to say is: "The devil made me do it."

The devil doesn't make us do anything. We choose to complain and whine to God all the time. We choose to follow Jesus when it is convenient for us and fits in between our bridge night and ball schedule. We choose to worship other things by giving our time, our money, and our energy other places than where God has called us to give those things.

The good news is that we have the opportunity to say no. At one church I served, the youth had a slogan on one of their summer activity shirts saying: "Not today Satan!" The same goes for us. As beloved children of God we are given the opportunity to say:

⁸ Ibid., 25.

“Not today Satan.” Jesus’ time in the wilderness reminds us we are not alone in our faith journey. God has given us the strength and the ability to resist temptation and choose to live for Christ today. As Christ’s beloved we too can survive the wilderness.

What trials and temptations do you feel on your walk in the wilderness today? How do you feel the Spirit leading you in the midst of temptation? What are ways you can say: “Not today Satan!”? When are times your prayers turn from pleas to complaining or whining? How do you try to manipulate God at times? What other gods lure you to worship them? How can you remember you are a beloved child of God?

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