

Lent 1, March 9, 2014 Genesis 2: 15-17, 3:1-7, Mt 4:1-11

Tempted and Tried

I know we have all been complaining about how long this winter has been, with never-ending cold weather. But what a rare treat to begin the season of Lent, in the second week of March, cross-country skiing on the St Lawrence River! If the ice hasn't already gone out, you would normally see the Ice Breaker crashing through the ice to get everything ready for the spring season. But what a joy it was on Friday to go out on the ice in the brilliant sunshine for a long ski, for that is my place of wilderness, the place where throughout my life I have gone, whether on ice or water, to contemplate life, to observe the tall wind turbines moving gently in the wind, to reach for the sky, to reach into my heart, to search for God. This time there was even food to eat as a coyote had recently killed one of my mother's herd of white-tailed deer that insist on living in her woods and there was plenty left over for birds and other wild animals.

The season of Lent always sends us out into the wilderness, and in today's reading, also to Paradise, which is really a wild place that is rich with plenty of good food to eat. Immediately after Jesus baptism when he hears the voice of God naming him as his beloved Son, the Spirit sends him out into the wilderness to forage in nature for a long time. It was the place too where John and his band of followers tried to live on nature, to contemplate the message and teachings of God. In this journey into the wilderness we hear echoes of the Israelites wandering the desert for 40 years, being tempted and tried and failing miserably time and again to be obedient to God's call in their lives.

It is a good example of how to live the spiritual life, to rely entirely on what nature provides, to embrace the simpler lifestyle where you can really focus in on the purpose of your life. We all may know someone who has done that – lived off the grid, with solar power, well water and grow-your-own-food. I remember when I was first involved in Bloor St United Church in Downtown Toronto in the mid 70's I joined a "Simpler Lifestyles Group". But I must

admit it always seemed ironic to be pondering the simpler natural life in a downtown urban core where temptations and wealth abounded. It's an admirable achievement to maintain a simpler lifestyle if it can be done, but it doesn't address our social obligation to the wider community as our vocation as a Christian in the global context.

Jesus spends a long time in the wilderness as he struggles with his hunger, his human needs, his identity, his vocation and how he will be obedient to God's call in his life. It is a difficult struggle, for in his most vulnerable hour, the tempter appears and challenges him profoundly. This negative figure is named in three different ways in Matthew's story – as the devil, the tempter and when Jesus gets really angry, as Satan.

There is no description of this powerful voice such as we might have in our minds from Dante's *Inferno* or other Medieval paintings. I am curious as to how you imagine or understand this devil, this tempter. Is it a Being, outside of the realm of God; the wily serpent as found in Genesis, or is

it the voice of chaos and confusion that is part of the wider purpose of God? In Genesis, we need to remember that the serpent is one of God's creatures, cunning and devious perhaps, but still one of God's creatures. Ancient mythology portrays the serpent as a symbol of wisdom.

Perhaps you imagine that as Jesus' struggles with various choices for his path, is this simply the voice of self-doubt? Of greed? Of will-to-power? It is hard for us to really get inside of Jesus' and Matthew's ancient worldview. Our tendency is also maybe to read back into the fantasy story knowledge from modern psychology, or our old friend Freud, which defines our inner struggles with our primal ego states, spelling out the power of our selfish egos.

At the same time, as people who have been targeted by the science of marketing and advertising for a few generations now, we know the power and allurement of the 'stuff' that money can buy for our own pleasure, how greed is a real force in our society. Every day we are bombarded with temptations to consume excess food, to search for

miraculous cures for our ills, to sit passively while billions are spent building up military power.

Here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he wasn't worrying about the small temptations that we sometimes hear about in Lent today, but he was really struggling with the big picture of his life, of how he would be faithful to the vision of ministry that God had given to him. If he was the Son of God – God's beloved- should he use his power to feed people, the change stones to bread? (perhaps Matthew believed he could do that).

If he was the Son of God, should he use his power to perform great miracles, to wow the crowds, to win people over to follow him? The gospels all have stories of wonderful, miraculous healings and other stories, but all seem to be in agreement that this was not the central purpose of Jesus' ministry, that this was not the way he would really fulfill his vocation. Even today, we know that people search for the miraculous in many fields, including churches, claiming that this was Jesus' purpose. But even here, right

at the beginning of his journey, Jesus reminds himself that it has been written – “do not put the Lord your God to the test!”

Finally, if he was the Son of God, the voice of temptation suggests that his call would be to seek to take over the world for God, to finally make Israel a world political power. We will hear throughout Jesus' ministry the challenge to be a military and political Messiah, even when the words are mockingly thrown at him as he hung on a cross – the King of the Jews.

So you can hear that Jesus is struggling with some profound issues as to what values, what images and visions will guide his life, how he will stay close to God's word and be faithful to what God wants for him so that the world will truly be saved for life as God has promised it. He wants to be obedient so that people would truly know the God who is the source of compassion and who care so much for this world, especially the poor and powerless of the world.

Whoever thought that the spiritual life was easy has not really entered the wilderness with Jesus or entered your own personal wilderness – for ultimately this is a spiritual place, the place of discernment, of reaching inward for some solid truths, for the source of inner strength and wisdom to live in the way God seeks us to live.

And so we begin this season of Lent with the journey inward as we contemplate the needs of the world around us, as we discern our vocation and our choices, as a church as we begin to implement our Vision Statement and action plan.

When Jesus had finished his ordeal, the angels of God surrounded him and waited on him – he was not alone – their were many beings that cared about him. The same is true for us – we are not alone – we journey together, and we are offered food for our bodies and the food of heaven for our souls. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the earthly and heavenly are met and intermingled for our nourishment, the nourishment of this community of faith.

And so as people with a faith that is still seeking truth, still seeking our role in society, in our families, in the life of the church, let us all rise as we are able and share in this statement of faith:

WE RESPOND TO GOD’S CALL

Affirmation of Faith

We affirm our faith together

We believe in God who has created and is creating;

Who made the fertile ground and the desert;

Who offers us choices

And provides the bread of life.

We believe in Jesus, who came to share our humanness and walked the journey of life ahead of us;

Who was tested to the limits and tried to the edge of endurance;

Who accepted the comfort and support of others
in life’s extremity and always showed God’s love.

We believe in the Spirit of God

Whose breath brings life to the dust of the earth,

Who leads us on through the season of life

And stays with us on the pathways of death.

This is the God we proclaim and worship

And seek to serve in our lives.