

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/MARCH 14, 2010

EASE/EXODUS 17:1-7 & LUKE 4:1-13

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I. THE TEXT

The season of Lent – a self-imposed 40-day desert experience that calls us to wrestle once again with what it is God asks of us in this short, earthly journey. Our 40 days in the wilderness of Lent mirror Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness with the devil. In turn, Jesus' 40 days mirror the 40 years the Hebrew people spent wandering the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. No mistaking it, the desert is part of the human experience. We've been in the wilderness with Jesus and the devil for the past several weeks. Hear that story one last time... the word of God from Luke's gospel...

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" ⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' ¹¹and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" ¹²Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

II. PRAYER: Illumine this, your ancient word, with the light of your Spirit. Open our minds and hearts that your truth may find a way in. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

III. WILDERNESS REVIEW

On the occasion of Jesus' baptism, God speaks from the heavens – "you are my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased." Words every child longs to hear from their parents. It is a tender, touching moment in which, in essence, God commissions Jesus into the family business – "go and show the world how much I love them." The next thing we know God's Spirit has hijacked Jesus to the desert for combat with the devil... to see what he's made of. Will he do what is right, will Jesus choose God's way? Or, do his own thing?

We've explored two temptations already – first, the lure of bread – of reducing life to fulfilling one's appetites. At this particular fork Jesus says to the devil, "No quick lunch – the purpose of life is more than personal pleasure and comfort – I am here to fulfill the will of God." Next – the lure of power – or the misuse of one's power at the expense of one's soul. The devil gives Jesus a bird's eye view of all the kingdoms of earth. "Jesus, all this can be yours – you can be 'king of the world.' Just one small caveat – you will have to shift your allegiance

to me.” At this fork Jesus appeals again to Scripture and tradition, “Not on your life – my primary allegiance is set in stone – I will worship God alone.”

IV. THE THIRD TEMPTATION

This morning, we come to the devil’s third and final wilderness temptation. The devil escorts Jesus to the highest spot of the temple in Jerusalem. There he tempts Jesus to stage an enormous publicity stunt. “This will be your shining moment – Jesus, take a flying leap off this steeple – the angels will catch you in mid-air – it will confirm your call and be splashed across the 6 o’clock news!”

Again, on the surface, the devil seems to be making a logical suggestion that would not only get Jesus out of this miserable wilderness, it would also validate his baptism and time in the wilderness. You see, it is thought that every morning, a priest climbed to the pinnacle of the temple to scan the heavens looking for the Messiah. The hope was, that today would be the day – and the priest would get to announce the good news to the people below. What better proof of messiah-ship could there be? Surely God will not allow the Messiah to plummet to his death before priest and people? And wasn’t that why he came? Isn’t he supposed to be the messiah – that’s what the angel announced to Mary. Again, that is often the way temptation is disguised – as something good, something that makes sense – but what makes sense, what is efficient, isn’t always what is right. All three of Jesus’ temptations are, in reality, shortcuts around the challenges of faith – the first – fulfilling our calling for others rather than ourselves; the second – being surrendered to God alone; and this – walking by faith rather than demanding proof. And again, Jesus is prepared for this particular assault.

The devil has become pretty savvy over the course of the temptations. Jesus has been quoting Scripture to the devil – but the devil knows Scripture too and quotes it right back. “Check out your own Bible, Jesus – it says right there in Psalm 91 that God will send angels, that: *On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.*” But Jesus sees right through him and, at this final fork in the road, this last ditch effort to get Jesus to split from the ways of God, Jesus says “no.” Here, in this debate we see biblical scholarship in action – how Scripture can be both abused and used: the devil quotes Scripture – completely out of context, of course, and uses a **d**escriptive passage as a **p**rescriptive command. But Jesus doesn’t (so to speak) fall for it. Using the words of Deuteronomy (6:16) that he’d been learning since childhood, Jesus answers the devil’s twisted misuse of Scripture with these words – “It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

V. PUTTING GOD TO THE TEST

Those were the same words Moses spoke to the Israelites during their 40 years in the desert – “*Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah,*” Moses warned. Let me remind you of the story that Madeleine/Jonathan read for us a few minutes ago. The Israelites, fresh off a miraculous Red Sea escape from their oppressors, just days after being showered with manna to fill their aching stomachs, their water bottles have run dry. They begin to whine and grumble and complain against Moses and Moses’ God.

Their complaint went something like this. “God has brought us to this awful place. We’re thirsty... we’re miserable. Clearly, that means that God cannot be trusted. But, if God will just apologize and come through with some water, well, then maybe we’ll get back on board. God, prove yourself – fill our water jugs – now!” How quickly they’d forgotten the God who’d rescued them from Egypt, who provided manna from heaven. “God have you

forgotten that your job description is to keep us comfortable? Prove your faithfulness to us again – get us water – or else.” That’s called putting God to the test – forcing God’s hand – requiring God to orchestrate life in our favor – or else.

Have you ever found yourself in the desert – in lousy, difficult circumstances asking, “*why has God brought me here?*” Have you ever been tempted to demand proof of God’s faithfulness? Wondered, perhaps angrily, “How could a loving God let me suffer like this?” It is a very human response in life’s difficult seasons. It is a question almost impossible not to ask, and many a faith has shattered on the hard places we too often encounter. Some have taken it as a sign of God’s absence or indifference. In my years of ministry I have often enough heard: “God just doesn’t work for me;” or “I pray and I don’t get what I want;” or “I went to church every Sunday for a year and things didn’t get better.” Hard questions – questions that cannot be answered with logic or mathematics, but only with the difficult response of faith. Harvard professor and chaplain Peter Gomes, remarks, “It does not take a great deal of imagination or courage to believe that God is on your side when you are prospering or winning; it takes a great deal of courage and imagination to believe that God is on your side when you are suffering or losing.”¹

Jesus discovered the truth of that statement in the first days of his ministry. As a Jew, he understood that being committed to doing things God’s way did not exempt him from suffering... rather, that God would be faithful **in** the suffering. What God truly desires is not so much to spare us the difficulties that all people face, as to empower us to become deep people, wise people, strong people, people of integrity and trust – people of significance in the midst of our very human lives. In his letter to the church in Rome the Apostle Paul wrote, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”² Although I would add that it can be pretty hard to remember that in the moment. Jesus answered the devil’s twisting of Scripture – “It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” There at the fork in the road Jesus said, “God has nothing to prove to me – I will trust and believe God’s love and faithfulness no matter what.” Jesus chooses the difficult ways of God over the much more reasonable ways of the devil – he would not avoid the suffering, he refuses to steer clear of the cross.

If Jesus struggled, we must not imagine ourselves exempt. In *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “To endure the cross is not tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ.”³ Life will push hard on us – that is its nature. We must not demand of God that it be anything different. As C. S. Lewis put it, “We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, ‘Blessed are they that mourn.’” Our work is to trust that God is somehow being faithful even in the midst of our troubles – and that God is perfectly capable of using what is difficult to refine and deepen and make us new. Hard work, indeed, and not done overnight.

VI. LENTEN REFLECTION

Lent provides us the opportunity to reflect on the places in our lives where we are tempted to put God to the test. Again this week a few questions for our Lenten reflection might be helpful.

- How am I responding to the difficult parts of my life – with complaint? Or demand? Or trust?

- Does my faithfulness to God depend on my perceptions of God's faithfulness to me?
- Am I willing to allow the difficult to deepen and shape me into the person God intends?

As with Jesus, in our answers and responses to questions such as these, the trajectory of our lives is set.

VI. THE EASY WAY?

Author Philip Gulley tells this childhood story of an old neighbor of the Gulley family, Dr. Gibbs. Gulley writes...

"When Doctor Gibbs wasn't saving lives, he was planting trees. His house sat on ten acres, and his life-goal was to make it a forest. The good doctor had some interesting theories concerning plant husbandry. He came from the "no pain, no gain" school of horticulture. He sparsely watered his new trees, which flew in the face of conventional wisdom. Once I asked why. He said that watering plants spoiled them, and that if you water them too much, each successive tree generation will grow weaker and weaker. So you have to make things a little rough for them and weed out all the weenie trees early on.

He talked about how [too much] watering made for shallow roots, and how trees that weren't watered [so much] had to grow deep roots in search of moisture. I took him to mean that deep roots were to be treasured. So he rarely watered his trees...

Doctor Gibbs went to glory a couple years after I left home. Every now and again, I walk by his house and look at the trees that I'd watched him plant some twenty-five years ago. They're granite strong now. Big and robust. Those trees wake up in the morning and beat their chests and drink their coffee black.

I planted a couple trees a few years back. Carried water to them for a solid summer. Sprayed them. Prayed over them. The whole nine yards. Two years of coddling has resulted in trees that expect to be waited on hand and foot. Whenever a cold wind blows in, they tremble and chatter their branches. Sissy trees. Funny thing about those trees of Doctor Gibbs. Adversity seemed to benefit them in ways comfort and ease never could.

Every night before I go to bed, I go check on my two sons. I stand over them and watch their little bodies, the rising and falling of life within. I often pray for them. Mostly I pray that their lives will be easy. "Lord, spare them from hardship." But lately I've been thinking that it's time to change my prayer.

Has to do with the inevitability of cold winds that hit us at the core. I know my children are going to encounter hardship, and my praying they won't is naïve. There's always a cold wind blowing somewhere.

So I'm changing my eventide prayer. Because life is tough, whether we want it to be or not. Instead, I'm going to pray that my sons' roots grow deep, so they can draw strength from the hidden sources of the eternal God.

Too many times we pray for ease, but that's a prayer seldom met. What we need to do is pray for roots that reach deep into the eternal, so when the rains fall and the winds blow, we won't be swept asunder.⁴

There in the wilderness the devil created three forks in the road for Jesus – three defining moments – each offering him an easier way, each tempting him to be less than God

intended, each holding out the possibility of a shortcut around the cross. But Jesus' roots were sunk deep in his love for God, deep in Scripture; deep in his community, deep in his commitment to be who God intended... though the way would be difficult. The desert is part of the human experience. Life can push us hard – that is its nature. As did Jesus, let us pray and strive, not for ease, but for roots that reach deep into the eternal.

[Well, Jesus and the devil finally finish their desert sojourn. At the end of Matthew's version of the temptations, angels come to minister to Jesus – there would be no need for that had the struggles not been difficult. Our text ends with these ominous words – ¹³*When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time.* They, like we, will meet again.]

VIII. PRAYER: Lord, our desire is for roots that reach deep into the eternal... that we might, by your grace choose the right over the easy, your will over our own, your ways over the world's. Grow us, deepen us, strengthen us, make us wise. We pray in the name of the Christ who was tempted in every way as we are. **AMEN AND AMEN.**

¹ Gomes, Peter, Introduction to Paul Tillich's *Courage to Be*, p.xxiii.

² Romans 5:3-4

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 97.

⁴ Gulley, Philip, *Front Porch Tales*, pp.17-19.