

Message: "Proof texting with the Devil" - 2-22-26

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

⁴Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" ⁷Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

"Lent is the season where we practice dying in order to learn living." I read that in an article this past week; it stuck with me as a powerful description of what the season of Lent is meant to provide life - by looking at its opposite. There are things that affirm life; and there are things that diminish life - and the difference is not always clear. Lent focusses on that which diminishes life, so we can understand better what affirms life.

Jesus is at the very beginning of his ministry work on earth; up to this point, we have largely a blank account of the life of Jesus; not much is known about his childhood, teen years, or younger adult life. But as he approached his 30th year, he is baptized by his cousin John the Baptist - and is immediately led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Some translations read "driven into the wilderness," which carries a very different emphasis; but whether driven or led into the wild country, the point is this episode precedes the formal ministry of Jesus - and I think it is an intentional precedent.

It brings to mind an experience I had more than once while growing up. I was a fairly athletic kid, the kind who channeled my deep introversion into athletic exertion. I rode the tires off my bicycle, wore the rubber off my shoes, wore the leather off my baseball glove, and basically wore things out because I was always running or jumping or hiking or racing somewhere. My philosophy was that the shortest distance between two points must always be traveled at extreme speed, regardless of mode.

One year, in fifth grade, I remember the segment of physical education class which involved different kinds of running - marathon, jogging, sprint, relays, and the like. Can you guess what my favorite style of running was? Sprint. I loved sprinting, mostly because I was the fastest sprinter in my class. I loved how fast I could run, but also I loved that I was the best at something, and it gave me

pride to win. But that gym class segment came with a painful and regular cost - I had terrible cramps in my calves that hit me after most races. You can probably guess why. The way I remember it was sitting on the bench after a race, relishing in my win, yet at the same time clutching at my leg with terrible cramps, and seeing my gym teacher come over to me, always saying some version of the same thing - never "good job at your win!" but "you didn't stretch before you ran!"

She was right of course; but I thought stretching was unnecessary. Just sitting there, moving muscles, extending feet and legs, but not moving anywhere, seemed like a waste of time. But over the course of that year, I turned my thinking around; pain is a great motivator, after all. I became regular in my stretching before a race - and I don't remember painful cramps after any run that began with stretching.

Stretching the body before exertion is important. So is stretching the soul if it is going to be put to work. I find this is a helpful way to understand the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness - as a stretching of his soul before he put it into the work of ministry. What I mean is that, before Jesus teaches and preaches and heals and performs miracles, before he goes up against Pharisees and Scribes and the powers of this world, before he does anything that has to do with his role as God's presence among people, he withdraws -- from everyone and everything. He traded externals for internals, perhaps. He goes into the solitude of the back country for forty days, away from the things of man, away from the provisions and security of society, apart from the norms of culture and civilization; he fasts for forty days, fasting from food yes, but also from human company or agenda. But this was no "Survivor" exercise, no episode from "Lost" we're talking about; this was more of a pilgrimage of preparation, an essential setting of the stage for the life and work that lay before him. Call it a spiritual cleanse; call it a purging of all non-essentials; call it a calm before the storm; call it a spiritual stretching with God before the work begins - whatever it was, it was an essential pause before his life moved on and his work began.

And then, at the end of that pause, as he felt the pangs of isolation reach their apex in hunger and thirst and loneliness and fragility, he was joined by the likeliest of companions when any human being finds himself on the edge of survival - he is joined by the devil, who also stretched Jesus, albeit in different ways.

It is said that to be human is to be temptable; that is, to be human is to be prone to certain pulls on our lives that thwart the natural balance of life as it was

meant to be. To be tempted is to experience the suggestions that exceed common sense or moral balance and find those suggestions somewhat palatable; and there's no end to such suggestions that sound good but work evil. In our scripture passage, it is the Devil who is suggesting to Jesus that he serve himself in different ways, namely through personal provision, personal protection, and personal power over the world. The problematic term here is "personal," which Jesus instantly recognizes as the problem with it all, and makes it known in his responses to the devil: "Make bread to satisfy your hunger" says the devil; "I need God more than bread," says Jesus. "Jump off this ledge and have God save you," says the devil; "You've got it backwards," says Jesus, "I don't command God." "I'll give you everything if you worship me" says the devil; "God is everything," says Jesus, "and you do not have God to give."

Serve yourself, says the devil. Everyone here understands this temptation; if you are human, you have needs and wants, desires and hopes, and things you want for yourself - health, happiness, peace, excitement, power, security, control. To be human is to constantly be tempted to serve ourselves.

Serve me, says the devil. I think everyone here can also understand this temptation, if we understand the term "devil" to be a personification of what is opposite or contrary to God. There are a lot of devilish voices out there promoting allegiance to themselves or loyalty to themselves or commitment to themselves above anything else, the keyword being "themselves." People believe things simply because the one they consider their leader says they are true; often this happens in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary; often what is true is the exact opposite of what they are saying; I wonder, do any present-day examples come to mind?

But then Jesus says the same thing in response to all of these devilish temptations: Serve God, says Jesus. Serve God, and only God, says Jesus. The conversation is over, the proof-texting game finished, the test mastered, the devil slinks away; now the real work begins, work directed by God and not us.

A way to think about this episode in the Jesus narrative is what we started with - Jesus can be thought of as practicing dying in order to learn living. He faced starvation and harm and extreme isolation and all the threats that come in the wildernesses of life - but this was before the temptations began. Could it have been that it was only as his human existence was on edge that he was made ready for the devil's showdown simply because we really only embrace God when we understand our need for God? Or more practically, we really only embrace God

when we feel our need for God? And maybe that's the best way to think of Lent - a season designed to help us feel our need for God?

You've likely heard the saying "There are no atheists in foxholes;" that's the kind of thing we're talking about here. The saying suggests that in times of extreme fear, danger, or desperation—in other words, when life hangs in the balance—people will turn to a higher power, regardless of their prior beliefs. This may or may not be true of everyone, but what is true is that we think differently when the stakes are personally high -- and our need for God is often most keenly felt at the raw edges of our human experience.

Which brings us to what this means for us today, in terms of following Jesus. We use that phrase quite often, for that is what Jesus asked us to do if we love God - he said, "Follow me," not "worship me." Sometimes I really wish he didn't say "follow me" -- don't you? Sometimes I wish he only said "Worship me." Give me worship any day, something we can control and shape and become passionate about and engage all our creative talents of song, liturgy, eloquence, and decoration; following Jesus, well, that gets messy. Following Jesus would take us into some very uncomfortable territory, like loving the unlovable or forgiving the unforgivable or speaking truth to power or suffering for the sake of another. It's tempting to worship Jesus instead of follow Jesus, isn't it?

Jesus will not have any of this, however; worship means nothing without living out what we say we believe. Jesus says - "follow me" - and we know he is speaking to us. We are to go where he goes and try to do what he does to the best of our ability. But we need to keep in mind that following Jesus starts with us entering the wildernesses of our lives and our world where we can discover who we are beyond human definition - and where we can hear God most clearly above the fray of human commotion. If we are to follow Jesus, we will always need spiritual stretching before any faithful endeavor.

I leave you with what I consider a wonderful way of saying this message about spiritual stretching, the kind Jesus did in the wilderness in his alone time with God and with the devil. This comes from author Christina Baldwin, and it is only one sentence long - it is the understanding that wilderness journeys "teach us to move at the pace of guidance." Isn't that a wonderful way to think about the forty days of Jesus? Isn't it a beautiful way to understand what faith should mean for each of us? May we not fear the wildernesses of life; may we see them as places where we learn to move at the pace of guidance - just like Jesus.