Sermon Response to Scripture proclaimed for Year A, Lent 1
Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-17, 25- 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11
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The Last Frontier

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

Human history has been written by the lives of people who have dared to enter the wilderness and cross frontiers. For example, Christopher Columbus crossed the ocean frontier. The civil rights movement was launched when Rosa Parks crossed the racial frontier by sitting in the front of a bus. Neil Armstrong crossed the outer-space frontier and dared to walk on the moon.

And speaking of the moon, the voice of “Star Trek” calls us to continually go where no one has gone before. It seems as if there are no limits to the frontiers that lie before us, nor to the adventures that await those willing to cross them.

There is, however, another frontier that even these historical figures might have approached with reluctance and caution, if we approach it at all. It is the frontier of our hearts – our inner life where the raw stuff of hope, love and faith are stored, along with fear, despair, uncertainty, and lurking memories of past affronts and injustices. It’s a personal frontier upon which each of us stands. Beyond it there lies a haunted land as vast as the very heavens.

To cross this inner frontier is to begin the great journey into spiritual growth, which most everyone wants but which few venture to find. Without the courage to begin that journey, we are condemned to live lives that are more churchy than religious, more frightened than faithful, and more captive than free.

We are all invited, as Jesus was, to enter the wilderness. To take a step across this near frontier, into a land of experience that is not at all so strange to us. Quite the contrary, it is a familiar land that we each have known many times. This frontier is called temptation. Spiritual growth begins when you successfully confront temptation.

Perhaps you and I are inclined to think that the opposite is true, that spiritual journeys are marked not by confronting but by avoiding temptation – that mature spirituality is found in the absence of temptation. Such a way of thinking holds that withdrawal and isolation are needed to develop a vibrant spirit.
But consider that even spiritual giants like St. Anthony of Egypt and Dame Julian of Norwich, who sought the privacy of a solitary life of contemplation, began their journey just as we do, just as everyone does. Then they each withdrew from the outward temptations of society. But they each ended up being plunged deeply into the place where temptation really lives – in the devices and desires of our hearts.

Now when the translation of the Lord’s Prayer was revised back in the 1960s, the first revision of the line “Lead us not into temptation...” was “Do not bring us to the test.” But the initial reaction to this change was overwhelmingly negative. The very thought of God bringing people to the test – bringing them to confront temptation - was repugnant. And so the majority demanded a change in the new wording, and they got it. That is why the modern form of the prayer reads “Save us from the time of trial,” even though the proposed change (Do not bring us to the test.) was a more accurate translation than either the beloved old form or the contemporary one.

Scripture, on the other hand, has no such reluctance when it comes to temptation, God’s use of it, or its place in our spiritual lives. In today’s Old Testament lesson, Eve was almost immediately thrust into her struggle with temptation. And in the Gospel story, Jesus, immediately after his Baptism, entered the wilderness to be tempted.

Lest there be any confusion about God’s role in the matter, Genesis goes into great detail about how God put the tree in the middle of the garden, and Matthew states that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

Temptation lies at the beginning of every spiritual journey because it is necessary – before you start out across the new frontier – you need to know just who you are, even when you are not at all sure of where you’re going. And be careful that you don’t heap all the blame on the serpent as Eve did. The serpent just told her that if they ate the fruit of the forbidden tree they “would be like gods, knowing the difference between good and evil.” The serpent told Eve the truth. It was the truth that tempted her to disobey God’s command. The truth that she and Adam “would be like gods.”
Is that always the essence of temptation – to be God-like? To be someone you’re not, possessing something not yours, attempting to take a shortcut to some destination you can never reach? Eve tried, through her own effort, to become a person she could never be. She started on a journey she could never finish because she turned her back on the only One who could get her there.

(pause)

Now I doubt any of us aspire to be like gods. In our behavior, however, do we act differently? After all, we speed on the roads as though the limits placed upon us were for others but not for us. We pollute the earth and the water and the air, and waste natural resources as though it were our sovereign right to do so. We judge one another as though it were our privilege and responsibility.

The fact of the matter is that we act as though we are gods a great deal of the time. We are not only tempted to be like gods; we do so without even realizing it. It is in our nature. We forget who we are. Instead of setting out on a spiritual journey, we become quickly lost in a spiritual desert.

(pause)

Jesus, on the other hand, was tempted to misuse his divine power by turning it to selfish ends; but he chose not to do so. He knew who he was. He knew his purpose was to guide the spiritual journeys of others from that same point of confronting temptation in our own wilderness.

I wonder if the suggestion of these two readings is that like Eve and Jesus, God does bring us to the test. But we need not fear it even though we are far less naïve than Eve and far less sophisticated than Jesus. All we need to know to begin our own journey is who we are – in all our vulnerability and ineptitude – and God will take it from there. That is what the test is all about, and we could not have a better guide than one who has already passed it, and now assumes the risk for us.

There is not a single issue that confronts us in life as individuals, as a nation, or as a Christian community – not a single issue that is free of temptation: the economy, life and death, the food we eat and the air we breathe, the space in which we live and must share with others who are not like us or who do not think as we do.
Temptation is a constant presence, but Jesus is a constant companion, and the Holy Spirit is a constant guide if you chose to confront it. You need not fear failing the test to which God brings you. The ones who fail it are the ones who think it is not there.