

In the Wilderness

Meditation on Luke 4:1-13

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

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“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where 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. The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.” ’ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” ’ Then 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, for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

I was visiting a member who had fallen and her family at Wuesthoff hospital a few weeks ago, expecting to stay, oh, about 30 minutes or so. My schedule was tight that day and if I stayed longer than a half hour, I would be late for an 11:15 meeting. I was ready to close with a prayer for healing, when the door burst open and in came two unexpected visitors. These friendly strangers would remind me that there is nothing more powerful than the ministry of presence when someone is in need, quietly, lovingly walking beside them as they persevere through the wilderness times of their lives. And that ministry is a God thing; it is unpredictable and often happens amidst chaos and suffering.

Bee Bee had arrived with Rochelle, her owner, one step behind. “Can we come in?” asked Rochelle, but she and her big, red, furry dog were

already in--and, taken by surprise, the family and I did not know what to say. Bee Bee is a certified therapy dog with her own hospital I.D., complete with first and last name, "Bee Bee Kenyon" and photo, though the picture doesn't do her justice, Rochelle said.

You can't tell by her appearance that Bee Bee, once upon a time, was a rescue dog. Her owners were moving and had too many dogs; they chose to give her away. She is a purebred, golden retriever. Her full name is "My Lady Daisy Bee(double e) Bee(double e)." Everyone calls her Bee Bee. Her job isn't complicated; she has to be her own sweet self, and bring comfort and joy to people who need lifting up. Bee Bee knows how to work a room. She approaches each person, quietly, head down, and waits for their response. People can't help but smile when she does that. She brought joy to one and another. Then, without hesitation, she approached the patient in the hospital bed. The patient smiled and said, "You are beautiful. Do you know that?" After Bee Bee had visited with each person in the room, and everyone was smiling, Bee Bee was looking pretty happy, too. I think she was thinking, "Mission accomplished." Then, she rested, for even working dogs need a rest!

While Bee Bee rested, Rochelle shared their story of a life interrupted by suffering, a life messy and chaotic. Bee Bee only goes out with Rochelle each morning between 10 and noon to work as a therapy dog at area hospitals. But Bee Bee has another full-time job at home. Rochelle's husband, Gordon, suffers from Parkinson's; he has been bed ridden for 4 years. Rochelle is his full-time caregiver. For 4 years, with the exception of the 2 hours each day when Bee Bee goes out visiting, Bee Bee has stayed by Gordon's side, seeking to comfort him in his pain.

Those 2 hours a day, when they are out and about--reaching out to others in need-- Rochelle says, have saved her life. And those 2 hours of visitation each day have brought joy to countless strangers, some who want to take “selfies” with Bee Bee and post them on Facebook. Or just reach down and rub her soft belly.

Bee Bee’s impact on others was brought home to Rochelle when Bee Bee was diagnosed with cancer. She had a tumor removed in January. The day I met them was their first day back visiting after Bee Bee’s illness. During her convalescence, she received many cards and letters from people to whom she brought joy and comfort in their time of need. They were sent to “Bee Bee Kenyon” at Rochelle’s home address! “Get well soon, Bee Bee!” some said. “We miss you!”

Rochelle thanked me for listening to her story. People don’t often invite her to share it, she said. It was then that I realized the real reason God had wanted me to stay at the hospital beyond the half hour for which I had planned--not just to meet Bee Bee and be reminded of the important ministry of presence, but to be there to encourage Rochelle.

With her husband’s illness and her all-consuming role as his full-time caregiver, Rochelle only has one friend, she says. Bee Bee!

In our gospel reading today in Luke, we are with Jesus in the wilderness with the devil--*diabolos* in Greek. As I read this, many questions pop into my mind, such as, “Why is he talking to the devil? Why is Jesus even listening to the voice of evil when he is God’s Son???” Readers know he is God’s Son at this point in Luke because in 3:21-22,

when Jesus is praying after John baptized him in the Jordan, a voice from heaven declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with *you* I am well pleased.” Strangely absent from this passage is the voice of God. Yet we know God is with him; we learn in 4:1 that it is the Spirit of God that has led him into the wilderness, which is not a lush, tropical rainforest, as we who live in Florida might imagine--but a dry, rocky, barren desert.

If you are thinking the “40 days” may be significant, then you are correct! This passage is meant to bring to mind the experience of Israelites, who, when they were set free from captivity in Egypt, then wandered in the wilderness for 40 years because of their lack of faith and failure to be obedient to God’s commands. This passage in Luke 4 is actually 3 different scenes depicting Jesus, the Son of God, being obedient to His Father’s will and refusing to be seduced into using his power and authority for any reason other than God’s purposes. These 3 scenes are connected by 3 quotes from Deuteronomy; each one recalls an event in which the Israelites were tested in the wilderness--and failed! Yes, Luke wants us to compare Jesus with Israel; Jesus will be tempted, but will succeed in every test that Israel failed.

Twice, the devil begins a temptation with, “If you are the Son of God...” But the devil isn’t questioning Jesus’ identity. Both the devil and Jesus know his identity and purpose; that’s why the devil has come to try to bring him down, so that God cannot use him to reconcile all humanity to Himself. The word that has been translated “if” may be better understood as, “since.” “*Since* you are the Son of God...”

In the first scene, Jesus is famished, and the devil says, “Since you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” The devil is presenting

a want as a need. Jesus refers to Deut. 8:3, when he answers, “One does not live on bread alone.” Deut. 8:3 says, “He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” In the second scene, the devil presents lies as truth, showing Jesus, in an instant, a vision of all the kingdoms on earth. He offers to “give” Jesus power and authority over them, if Jesus bows down and worships him. But the devil doesn’t have power and authority over all the kingdoms of the earth; it is not his to give. Jesus quotes from Deut. 6:13, “The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.” For the third temptation, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem to the pinnacle of the temple and this time, the devil quotes scripture. He says, ‘Since you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here,’ and then he quotes Psalm 91:11-12, “for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus’ reply, from Deut. 6:16, recalls when Israel complained they had no water to drink and demanded that Moses perform a miracle to prove that the Lord was still among them. “Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.”

After this final temptation, the devil, *diabolos*, leaves Jesus. But the devil, who would have an important role to play in Christ’s passion and death, would be back.

Christ’s wilderness experience will help prepare him for his public ministry that immediately follows the 40 days of temptation. But what

does Christ's wilderness experience teach us? I have heard sermons on this passage that focus on how to overcome personal temptation by quoting Scripture, holding fast to the Word of God. I see other important lessons from this passage, as well, including encouragement for us during this season of Lent, when we intentionally enter into Jesus' experience of 40 days in the wilderness, repenting and confessing our sins, putting away what has become like an idol to us, and worshiping and serving only the Lord. It is a time when we seek a closer relationship with God and to spend more time in His Word and in prayer, listening for God's voice. It is a time to respond to God's love by showing compassion and kindness to friends and neighbors in need. And that may mean changing our schedules and routines to make time and space for just *being* with people, so that special ministry moments, such as my encounter with Bee Bee and Rochelle a couple of weeks ago, can take place.

I was a little late to my 11:15 meeting the day I stayed to meet Bee Bee and Rochelle. But I was blessed with the affirmation that there is nothing better for us to give than to give of ourselves, just being who God made us to be. And by the Spirit that dwells inside of us, revealing God's love.

Let us pray.

Holy One, thank you for your Word that teaches us how to live in this world as we await and long for your Son's Second Coming. Thank you for your Spirit that is always with us, strengthening us and guiding us

through the wilderness times of our lives. Reveal your loving presence, Lord, to those who are suffering in our congregation and community. Heal the sick, especially Rochelle's Gordon, and comfort those who mourn the loss of loved ones. Give us more compassion, Lord, as a church and help us to open up time and space in our lives so that more ministry moments beyond our church walls may happen. Reassure us that we have all that we need to minister to the world, with your Spirit that lives inside of us--and just by being ourselves, the people you have made us to be. In Your Son's name we pray. Amen!