

**Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Lent I, March 13, 2011
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia**

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11

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

Last week, in the gospel reading, we were on the mountain top. Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up the mountain...and there, Jesus was

transfigured...he glowed with divine presence and blessing.

In Scripture, mountains are a traditional place of encounter with God. Moses, goes up Mount Sinai, and receives the Law (Exodus 19). When Queen Jezebel sought Elijah's the prophet's life, Elijah fled, and traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God and there...the Lord speaks to him in a "still, small voice." (I Kings 19)

This week, as we read the gospel story, we are in a very different place. We are not on the mountain top, but we are in the wilderness.

Now, Americans have a love affair with the wilderness. In the popular mythology the wilderness is a place of "wholesomeness and genuine innocence"¹ replete with chip monks and furry bear cubs. I know I look forward all year long to my annual pilgrimage to the wilderness, to the Appalachian Trail for a hike. I love stepping off into the woods...no cell phones, no e-mail, no meetings...just one foot in front of the other and good times with my hiking partners.

But you know what? When I am on the Appalachian Trail, I am following a way through the wilderness that is blazed, marked, every so often so I don't lose my way. And wonderful groups of volunteers maintain the trail, keeping it safe and cleared. I have maps and guides. I know where the camp sites are and most importantly, where to find water. My experience is, "Wilderness Lite."

In the Scripture, wilderness is something very different from this. Wilderness, first and foremost is a place of failure and apostasy.²

The defining event for the children of Israel was their liberation from slavery in Egypt and their moving through the Red Sea waters. Eventually they would make it to the Promised Land...but before that, for a generation, there was the wilderness. And this was marked by - Devastation. Bitterness. Conflict.

The children of Israel sin and sin boldly in the wilderness, don't they? When Moses came down from the mountain, with tablets of the Law etched by the very hand of God, what does he find but all the people worshipping a golden calf.

¹ Quoted from a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Richard Lischer, delivered on Lent I, 1985 at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Durham, NC. This quote, other quotes in the sermon and many of this sermon's ideas are indebted to Rick Lischer.

² As noted in the aforementioned sermon by Rick Lischer.

(And don't you just love Aaron? Moses looks at him, "What...?" And Aaron says, "I gathered the gold, threw it in the fire and out jumps this calf. I don't know!" [Exodus 32] We can relate to Aaron.)

So, when Jesus emerges from the waters, not of the Red Sea, but of the Jordan River and heads out into the wilderness, we know what to expect. We can hear the ominous tones.

One travel brochure describes the wilderness of Jesus' temptation this way: "It is an area of contorted strata where the ridges run in all directions, the limestone is blistered and peeling, rocks are bare and jagged, it glows and shimmers with heat like some vast furnace..."³ The wilderness, far from being a place of innocence and wholesomeness, is a war zone. Jesus goes out into the wilderness for an encounter, a confrontation with evil itself. Jesus goes out to be tempted.

Just as we tame the wilderness in our imaginations, we trivialize temptation. We think of temptation as a few extra calories... a few extra dollars on ourselves because we deserve it...just a little lie, it won't hurt anyone...

But you know what...though temptation can present itself in a lot of seemingly trivial ways, it is anything but trivial. Rick Lischer, a Lutheran clergyman and also my homiletics professor at Duke Divinity School has said, "Temptation is a missile aimed at you from Satan and when it hits you it shatters your relationship with God and you forget who you are."⁴ That is the bottom line about temptation...it is a challenge that is meant to make you forget who you are. Whatever the action being suggested, underlying that is the threat of amnesia.

When the serpent saddles up to Eve in the Garden, the agenda isn't really about expanding the menu, is it? The agenda is to make them forget that God created them...bury the thought that God created them to voluntarily live in harmony with his purpose for them. The agenda is to make them forget they are a creature, dependent upon God, and to strike out on their own. And we know how well that worked out!

When Jesus enters the Wilderness of Temptation, the devil challenges him three times. Turn these stones to bread. Throw yourself off of the Temple. Worship me and gain the world. Jesus responds each time by bringing the focus back to God. We

can't live by bread alone, but by God's word. I will not test God. I will worship only God. Jesus is immovable and steady. Jesus never forgets who he is. What Adam and Eve couldn't seem to do, Jesus does.

So, what is the connection between the temptation of Jesus and our own temptations? What is the connection to all of this and the season of Lent?

Let me be very clear about one thing Jesus is not telling us to put ourselves in the way of temptation. "Sure. Go out in the desert...I did. Do battle. It will make a man or a woman out of you." Certainly not! That is not the message.

The prayer Jesus gave us specifically says, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." No...choosing to place ourselves in harm's way is wrong. It would be like someone with a drinking problem hanging out in the ABC store just to prove they could do it. Maybe they can. Maybe not. Regardless, it is a stupid choice.

The story of Jesus' temptation tells us is that temptation is real and it is serious. But we don't have to go looking for it. Truth be told, temptation has found us...and we have given in.

What we are called to do is to honestly discern where we have given into temptation, where we have sinned, where we have forgotten that we are God's beloved child with a mission to undertake and a life of holiness to lead.

Where has greed or lust taken over? Or, picking up on Paul's litany from Galatians chapter five, where have we given into "fornication, impurity, licentiousness...strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these."

Or yet again, from the Ash Wednesday liturgy, where have we shown an intemperate love of worldly goods. Where have we been guilty of waste and pollution of God's creation. How have we been blind to human need or suffering, been indifferent to injustice. What about our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us?

The variety is great. The issue is the same. These sins destroy our relationship with God and make us forget who we are. We wander aimlessly rather than living with godly intention, with true direction and holiness.

So, as you begin Lent ask yourself, what sin do you need to confront? Where have you given into temptation? When have you forgotten who you are? Build your Lent around the answer to those questions...and remember...Christ Jesus walked into the wilderness, into that vast and shimmering

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

furnace...and emerged as our Lord, tempted yet undefiled.

The right man is on our side, as Luther said. The man of God's own choosing. Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing. But thanks be to God, we claim the victory in Christ Jesus.

Be bold this Lent. Speak the truth to your heart. Remember who you are. Amen.