



# Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

## ***Trials in the Wilderness***

Sermon by Rev. Tim Strommen

on Matthew 4:1-17

Sunday, January 20, 2019

When I think of the Christian life, I think of two concepts held in tension. On the one hand you the message “you are loved by God and accepted just the way you are! Rejoice and believe it! And then on the other hand, “I am called to be a follower of Jesus” and how we live our matters”.

And these two are different, but you need them both for Christian life to be alive! If you only emphasize that your need to be a disciple, and that your life matters, and forget about God’s grace - you tend to think that it is all up to you, and the result of that is either self-righteousness, or despair and unworthiness. If you only emphasis being God’s grace and unconditional love and forget that you are called to a faithful life - you end up eventually not caring about either. If you aren’t in a daily relationship with Christ as a disciple, well, it just kind of fades. They are both true and important and they really go together. In this Bible story today, it is really about our spiritual lives, and our walk with Jesus.

Our Gospel lesson today speaks of Jesus going into the wilderness, driven by the Spirit of God, was there 40 days, and was tested by Satan. It says that Jesus fasted, and was hungry. Now it was not uncommon for people to do this. Prophets, earnest men and women searching for religious understanding, mission and purpose, going into the quiet, stark desert to listen to God. Right before Jesus went in the desert, all four Gospels speak about Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist, and there was a voice from heaven, God declaring “You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”. Many scholars believe this was a defining moment for Jesus, a calling, an epiphany, a vision.

So, then Jesus goes in the wilderness to gather clarity about his mission. He fasted, thought deeply, certainly prayed, and it says Satan came to him with 3 three suggestions, at three locations, wilderness, temple, mountain.

- 1) **if you are the Son of God**, turn stones into bread,
- 2) **if you are the Son of God**, jump down from the temple and make God save you, he’ll call out the angels,
- 3) **3) if you are the Son of God**, you can have the whole world with all its kingdoms and wealth, if you bow down to me.

It would seem that Satan was trying to define alter Jesus’ mission for him, and what it means to be the Son of God. These suggestions may have several temptations in them, but I believe the strongest is: “Jesus, you don’t have suffer. Do a miracle, get wealthy and important,

call out the angels if you get in trouble - you don't have to suffer. In many ways, you don't have to be human, because that means dying.

Now for me earlier in my life, this story just didn't have much power to it, because I thought, "doesn't Jesus know everything, isn't Jesus - God, doesn't he already know his mission, - what chance does Satan have of tempting Jesus? This is child's play for Jesus, he can't be tempted, can he? Lately, what has helped give more power to this story is to take seriously Jesus' humanity. We do confess that Jesus came to the human race, we just celebrated Christmas, we sang about his born. We say Jesus was "true God, but also TRUE MAN". But it seems it is so easy to go right to his divinity, which then cancels out his humanity. Pretty soon the earthly Jesus is more like Superman, he can do anything. And he knows everything. But let's look at Jesus again, with his humanity, that we confess.

How to understand the earthly Jesus, certainly there is mystery there. When Paul speaks in Philippians of Jesus, "and he emptied himself taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death". **What does "emptying" mean?** Jesus is from God, but emptied himself into our world, as a human. This certainly suggests that there was a process going on for Jesus, as it says in Luke when he was 12, he grows in wisdom. He must be growing in wisdom as a man. And for these 40 days in the Wilderness: there was this voice "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread, jump down from the temple, call out the angels. you don't need to suffer". And this story becomes powerful when I see the man Jesus struggling with what is ahead of him. His mission, as Son of God. You know I'm sure in those 40 days, Jesus was in prayer to God. And in human form, prayer with God can take the shape of encounter. My dad, who is human man, at 22, 1942, when because of a bad back from a car accident was rejected by the army. Around this time, wondering about his future, he says he was "called" to the upper room of his college house. There for 30 minutes or 2 hours, he doesn't know, he was in the presence of God. At 99-year-old, which he is now, he remembers well, he said he never spoke a word or heard a word., but said there was conversation, questions, responses, all about a call to the ministry. Humans can have encounters in prayer, with the Holy.

I believe Jesus in the wilderness, as is written in the Gospels, spent hours alone, praying to God. And if my dad can have an encounter with God, Jesus the man I'm sure was enveloped in the mystical presence of God, perhaps this is when he got to know God as "Abba". I'm sure he sensed a hard journey ahead. Indeed, as a man, growing up Nazareth, he was totally aware of the Jewish leaders, some of them with corrupted arrangement with the Romans to profit from the temple, their desire to define the religion, and that they would not take Jesus' ministry well. And Romans, any hint of another Messiah or Zealot coming with followers would be crushed. He may not have directly known about the dross in the wilderness, but I'm sure he senses the huge danger and suffering head. To be human was to suffer, to be a prophet was to die. What did it mean to be the Son of God?

And Satan, probably throughout the 40 days, was coming with his temptations, "you don't need to suffer." Jesus says, "be gone, Satan", I worship God alone. And I will be God's

servant, and my actions will tell what God is like, I am ready for God's work to work through me, in me, even to death.

And Jesus emerges from the desert. what does Jesus do? He wants to get to know fishermen, shepherds, common people, he goes to his home town and announces "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to give good news to the poor, bind up the broken hearted. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn. And he wants to get to know tax collectors and sinners, he eats with them, and pharisees and Sadducees, he eats with them too, and challenges them. it says that when Jesus saw the poor people in Galilee, he had compassion on them for they seemed like sheep without a shepherd, and in the temple he got angry, and overlooking Jerusalem he got deeply sad, and with Pharisees he got strong and challenging, and with Mary and Martha, he sensed the situation and got wise. I am drawn to an earthly Jesus who I like to think of him as much human as he could be with also being the Son of God, (however that works). And because of that, he knows me. He knows us, He knows our world. He lived, he felt, he suffered in it. He loves us, **and he calls us to follow.**

Now ultimately the earthly Jesus' life would lead him to the cross - suffering, experiencing death which comes along with being human. And his death and resurrection would seal God's message to us: "you are loved, forgiven and accepted just the way you are!" That is the Gospel, the Good News. We need always to approach this knowing we don't desire this, it is a gift. An Amazing grace.

But on the other hand, there is His call, "follow me". It comes from the Risen Jesus still, but its power and direction still come from the words, teachings, actions, of the earthly Jesus so long ago. "Love your neighbor as yourself", "I was hungry, and you gave me food, for as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me". "You are the salt of the earth", "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Jesus showed and embodied the Heart of God. And still says "**follow me**".

Being our passage is on the temptations of Jesus, I think whenever we talk about discipleship, and this "walk with Jesus", we need to address our own human lack of sight, tendency for blind spots, and getting off track, and falling down and getting up.

**A few decades ago a good friend of mine got off course.** After he was repairing relationships that he had damaged, and making amends from the people he had hurt, and thought deeply about what had happened - He explained it this way, He said "I pictured my life as on a boat, and I'm sailing in the direction of the far shore that I believe in. He said, My Christian faith, my values, the kind of person I am. All moving in the right direction. But he said, "there is a phrase -the fog of war, where in the middle of it, it is confusing and hard to know exactly where you are and which direction you are going". he said it's like that in life, the fog of life. And he said, I got off track. I couldn't see clearly what was happening, but I finally realized I wasn't moving to that distant shore of who I was, my values, my faith. I got off track".

When we consider our walk with Jesus, our life with God, it is important to know as humans we have and will always have blind spots, get off track, fail. There was a voice that tried

to get Jesus off track. But certainly more us, there are forces, voices that try to alter our sense of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, a child of God. ***“If you are a child of God, as long as you believe, its OK to hate certain people.” “if you are a child of God, you will be successful, and if you see poor people, it means God does not bless them. If you are an American, and a Christian, God loves you better than other people”.*** I’ve heard this stuff. We get off on the wrong direction, with ideas and thoughts that cause us to not love others. So, what can help us?

**But we are called, by Jesus, to follow him.** We are called to be active in this world, to be compassionate, to live lives that mirror the Love of God. To be little Christs, as Martin Luther said. But we must humbly know that to be faithful followers, we will fall on our faces at times, and get off track. **So, what can help us?** Being in community is important. But so are the **personal, alone practices.**

- **Finding a sanctuary** is another suggestion. It could be your backyard, BWCA, lake cabin, a room in your house. A sanctuary is a safe place, a place to heal your soul, usually beautiful, quiet. A place to think, reflect, about how you can be a follower of Jesus.
- **Journaling is one.** I have found this helpful. Getting a special book and writing your thoughts about your life as you go. It can be taking time and writing - “how am I active in the world as a follower?”, setting up a yearly plan “What do I feel called to do?”. Or, a daily reflection about an event: “Was I being helpful, or did I just really hurt someone”? Analyze, “why did I do that?” “How is God active in my life?”
- **Bible Reading.** There are many different approaches here. There is Bible study. Then there is an approach which my sister in law has found very meaningful. Lectio Divina. It is not study but praying with the Bible. You read a short passage and ask four questions: 1) What is this passage saying that everyone would understand? 2) What is this passage saying to me, today? 3) What would I wish to pray to God about considering this passage? 4) What is this passage asking me to do, or to change?
- **And Prayer.** This friend of mine developed a singing prayer as he commuted to work, “Lord of all Hopefulness”, this song goes through the day, be there at our waking, labors, homing, sleeping. But he added further verses of the day “be there at our learning, calling, failing, and dying”. And he found that the song also can be seen as going through our life. “Lord Give us we pray” For 10 years, he said he never missed a commute without this prayer. It became a daily look at his life, his failings, his gifts, his faith. Some people have found great comfort in written prayers from others. Some find just making it up as they go. Some have found a rhythm of the same prayers each time that they have fashioned. Some like early morning, some evening.

And I would say all of these can assist us in our journey of being followers of Jesus, how are we treating people, in what ways are we helping others, caring for others, loving others, as Jesus calls us to do. And in our discipleship, we must know that we are not doing this to earn God’s love, to impress others, we can’t do it perfectly, but also, we shouldn’t get down on ourselves and get discouraged either. We just try to do it faithfully because Jesus calls us to live a life in love of God and others, the best we can. And I believe that brings the most joy in life. And then always, always, on the other hand - “we are loved and accepted by God, forgiven and claimed by God, just the way we are. Rejoice in it!” AMEN.