

“SONGS OF OUR SAVIOR: I – ‘JESUS, TEMPTED IN THE DESERT’”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

February 22, 2015

1st Sunday of Lent

Mark 1:9-15

The other day I was talking to a young person in our church, and he asked me what I was preaching about this week, and I told him “temptation.” You know what he responded? “Why do you always have to talk about temptation?”

Ouch! Well, he’s right, it does come up a lot, but that’s because temptation is one of the greatest threats to our Christian faith. Perhaps that’s why, the first Sunday of Lent every single year features the Gospel story of Jesus tempted by the devil in the desert after his baptism. If we’re going to spend Lent trying to grow deeper in our faith, we might as well hit the biggest threat head-on.

So, temptation. We tend to look at temptation in one of two ways – either we laugh about it, or we squirm in our seats about it. The easy way, of course, is to laugh about it. We’ve become really good at that, and in fact, have lots of cute sayings about temptation, like:

Flip Wilson’s famous: “The devil made me do it.”

Or Mae West’s: “I generally avoid temptation, unless I can’t resist it.”

Or, how about these? “Opportunity may knock only once, but temptation leans on the doorbell!” And finally, “Lead me not into temptation; oh, what the heck, follow me, I know a shortcut!”

Oh, they’re all pretty funny, because we know how true they are. It does sometimes seem like temptation leans on the doorbell, always there, always wooing us to do things we know we ought not do. That’s why, when it comes to the season of Lent, we tend to try to tackle those things that tempt us, to give them up, at least for a season – chocolate, gossip, alcohol, Facebook, spending, too much time in front of the television or computer – well, you get the idea.

We’re not the first to face the fight with temptation. We all know it goes way back, back to that perfect place that God created in the beginning – the garden of Eden. There stood Adam and Eve and in front of them stood the tree that God told them not to touch. Of course, all around them were lots of other trees, but there

was that one! It was like it was screaming their names – come on, Adam and Eve, it's no big deal, come on! And so they did. They yielded to temptation, and human beings have been doing it ever since.

And in this morning's Gospel lesson, it's Jesus who is on the hot seat. This year's account of Jesus in the wilderness of temptation comes from the Gospel of Mark, and his account is very different from that told by Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke get into the nitty gritty of the temptation by the devil. They tell us the things with which the devil tried to entice Jesus – he tried to get him to turn stones into bread so that he wouldn't have to be hungry; he tried to get him to jump off the pinnacle of the temple, to prove that his God would save him; and he tried to get him to look at everything in front of him, and know that he could have it all, power, authority, everything, if he would only say yes to the devil. Matthew and Luke tell us everything about Jesus' experience with the devil.

Mark, on the other hand, tells us very little. Hear again what he says: "The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." (Mark 1:12-13)

Short, sweet and to the point – that's Mark. So this morning, I want us to look a little more closely at Jesus' experience in the wilderness through the three different things that Mark mentions – the Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan, the wild animals, and the angels.

First, the Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness. It seems a bit odd doesn't it, that the Spirit who was present in Jesus' baptism, just moments earlier, the Spirit who poured down upon him God's love for him, the Spirit who empowered Jesus to go forth and touch the world in incredible ways – would then, in the blink of an eye, drive him into the wilderness? That doesn't seem like much of a blessing, does it?

It was forty days and forty nights in a desert, mind you – hot in the days and cold at night. He was all alone, bereft of human companionship. Some blessing, huh?

So why did the Spirit of God do that to Jesus? Well, as you know, after Jesus leaves the wilderness of temptation, he goes right out into the world and begins his public ministry – choosing disciples, preaching, teaching, healing, loving and caring for the last, the lost and the least. So the Spirit of God sent him into the wilderness to get him ready for that.

How? By having him enter fully into the human experience. Jesus was fully human yet fully divine, but this forty days would have him, if you will, “walk a mile in our shoes.”

I was reminded this week, of an episode of the wonderful TV show M*A*S*H* in which Father Mulcahy, the camp priest, was trying to give pastoral care to a soldier who had been wounded and severely traumatized by his experience at the front. The soldier wanted no part of talking, because he discovered that the good Father had never been anywhere near the front. Later in the episode Mulcahy finds himself exactly there where he helps to take care of a soldier who has been severely wounded while shells explode all around them. After he returns to the M*A*S*H* unit, he goes back to the hospital tent and then, the wounded soldier welcomes him and talks to him, because now, he gets it. He’s been there.

Now, because Jesus has been there, in the wilderness, in the face of temptation, he gets it. He gets the human experience. He understands how tempting it is to say yes, when you’re so hungry for something, even if it’s not good for you. He understands how tempting it is to say yes, when someone dares you to do something to prove how much God loves you. He understands how tempting it is to say yes, when you can make yourself look great, when you can be in command, when you can be the “big man on campus.” Because of Jesus’ time in the wilderness of temptation, he gets the human experience, he knows what we go through, he’s walked the walk that we walk. That, is precisely why the Spirit drove him there in the first place. So that he would know and that we would know – he’s been where all of God’s children are – he knows what it means to be fully human.

So there is no time when we cannot turn to him for help in facing our own times of temptation. What strength we can draw from that, as we go day to day, trying to say no to the things that tempt us, the things we ought not do.

The second thing Mark talked about was “the wild animals” that were there. No doubt, in that vast wilderness, there were wild animals, and Jesus had to be on guard every moment lest his life be threatened. Thankfully, blessedly, most of us don’t face that in our lives, but I want to ask us this morning to think of the temptations in our lives as the wild animals that threaten us.

Let me explain, by way of a story. A pastor tells of one of his parishioners – a young man, about 25 years old. This young man had been a member of one of the pastor’s confirmation classes when he was about 13. He had been a good kid, but then he went off to college, and there started drinking, and then got into drugs. Before long his grades started to collapse, he skipped classes, and finally, dropped out of school.

The pastor didn't see him for quite a few years, but he had heard, through the grapevine, that the young man had finally cleaned up his act, gotten into rehab, and was making a new life for himself. And then, one day, he showed up for worship. He looked good. After church, the pastor got a chance to talk with him, and asked him how he was doing. He replied that it was "minute by minute, hour by hour. I spent the whole service thinking about the fact that five minutes from this church I could score a hit of drugs if I wanted to." And do you know what this pastor thought to himself? "That's what it's like when the wild animals are with you in the desert." (On-line, Jon Walton, "In This Corner," 2/20/12, First Presbyterian Church of NYC)

Boy, is he right. That's what it's like. Temptations are all around us, like wild animals waiting to pounce, trying to get us to do that which we ought not do. And not just life threatening things like taking drugs, but everyday things as well.

One of the saddest things I read this week as I prepared this sermon was an account of a pastor who, one evening, was asked by his children to read them a bedtime story. At the time, he was writing his sermon for the following Sunday, so he told them to go on ahead to bed, and he'd be right there. So they went off to their bedroom, and he returned to his computer for what was to be just a moment, but turned out to be several hours. When he finally got up and went into their room, they were both fast asleep. Do you know what that sermon he was writing was about? Loving your children! (On-line, Edward Markquart, "Satan Sunday")

Friends, the wild animals of temptation are all around us, and they'll do anything they can to draw us in the wrong direction, make wrong decisions, do wrong things. It's part of the human experience, it's what Jesus discovered in the wilderness.

But he also discovered that he was not alone in the fight against the temptor – angels were with him, and that means, so was God. He was never alone in the fight, and neither are we. God gave him the strength to look the devil in the eye stare him down, and deny him. It was not easy, it never is, but with God at his side, he could do it, and so can we. It's all about remembering that God is with us, and that if we have God, we have it all.

You all recognize the name of Kayla Mueller. Tragically she died at the hands of ISIS a few weeks ago. She was an aid worker, who was captured and held as a hostage until she was brutally murdered. Maybe you've heard more of her story. She was an incredible young woman, who handled her situation with grace and dignity. At some point in her captivity, her time in the wilderness, she wrote a very moving letter to her parents. I want you to hear some of what she wrote:

She said, "I remember Mom always telling me that all in all, in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in my experience where, in

every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our Creator because literally there was no one else . . . by God and by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in free-fall. I have been shown in darkness, light; and have learned that, even in prison, one can be free. I am grateful.” (On-line, Janet Hunt, “Dancing with the Word: More Than Enough in Wilderness Times)

What an incredible witness to God’s presence, power and sustaining love in all the times of our lives – when the wild animals of temptation threaten us, and when the angels of God carry us. My prayer is that, during this season of Lent especially, we may draw strength from the story of Jesus’ time in the wilderness of temptation, and be able then to stare into the face of the devil when he calls to us, and say no. Friends, we do not walk this journey of life alone – Jesus, the one who has walked it already is with us – and he will give us what we need to do it well.

So, as part of our Lenten journey together, this morning, I want to invite you to spend a few moments in silence and contemplation. In each of your bulletins, there are two copies of a picture of an apple. I invite you to take them out right now, and find something with which to write – a pencil or pen. I’ll give you a minute to do that.

Okay, now, for a few moments, think about your life and the things that tempt you – they might be looming right now like wild animals, they might be something which seems more irritating than life-threatening – but whatever it is that tempts you right now, write it down on that apple – on both copies. This is just between you and God – not to share with anyone else.

Write it down and in doing so, give it to God to help you fight that battle. Then, during the hymn we’ll be singing in a few minutes, you can, if you wish, bring one copy of that insert folded up, and lay it down before God at the altar rail. Stay there and pray that God will give you the strength to say no to the temptation and say yes to growing closer to him.

So now, let us all think about the things that tempt us, and ask God to help us fight the battle.