

January 15, 2023: THIS DAY'S SERMON – Temptation in the Wilderness

Reading: Matthew 4:1-17

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Let us pray: *Loving Creator, through the power of your Holy Spirit, you call us into the wilderness of earthly life. Open our hearts to know your calling. Open our ears to hear your Word of Truth in our daily lives. Enliven the Spirit you have placed within us and send us out to love and serve your world, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Having done nothing to warrant it, God has declared Jesus to be the Beloved Son in whom God is well pleased. We are taught that immediately following this declaration by God, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he will be “tempted” or “tested”.

On what, exactly, I wonder, is Jesus going to be tested? And why? For the most part, we read and hear this passage as proof of Jesus’ ability to resist the devil’s temptations. From there, it is easy to see it as a measure for how we are called to respond as we face our own tests in the wilderness of life.

I would guess that most of us know the value of measuring ourselves against the successes and failures of others. It rarely takes us down a life-giving path. Measure ourselves against Jesus – God Made Flesh – is the highest of all benchmarks. Is it really helpful, then, or fair, to use the temptation of Jesus as a model for how we are called to respond to the testings we are sure to face in our earthly journeys?

I have to wonder if the devil is, both literally and figuratively, in the details here. Might it be that stopping to assess **our** own ability to respond faithfully to temptation prevents us from noticing the holy callings God is making on our everyday lives?

Could it be that our fear of not being worthy enough, good enough, strong enough is actually serving as a smoke screen of sorts – something that makes us so wary of what lies beyond the smoke that we do not step into it to live the experience?

Is it really our response to the test that we are called to focus on here? Or is it the fact that God is calling us to recall who and whose we are in each of those tests? Remember, God declared Jesus to be the beloved son even before Jesus engaged in this period of testing.

Perhaps, then, we should shift our gaze from the test score to the holy calling that comes with being declared “beloved”. Especially in light of the fact that the next passage in Matthew’s Gospel is Jesus’ calling of the disciples. A calling which consists of nothing more than “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

We learn quickly and well from the ordinary men and women who respond to this call that it does not come as a pivot point to perfection. Why, then, would we expect it to be for us?

Knowing that we are not called to a state of perfection, but, rather, servitude, let us talk about what it means to say yes in response to an invitation to follow Jesus.

Richard Rohr reflected last week on what it means to respond to God’s call of love and justice for the common good, reminding us of the people throughout history who were graced with the ability to act beyond and outside their self interest for the good of the world.

People like Martin Luther King, Jr., whose memory we will remember and honor tomorrow; Rosa Parks, Gandhi, Cesar Chavez and Mother Teresa; even Jesus’ mother Mary herself. Through the inspiring witness – the prophetic voices – of these people we see strong evidence that the mind of Christ still inhabits the world.

They are a reminder to each of us that God continues to call prophetic voices into the world. Voices as seemingly meek and ordinary as our own. Lest we forget, as written by theologian Mirabai Starr, not all prophets do as they are told. Not at first, anyway.

When the call comes, most of them turn left and then right: “Who, me?” they murmur. If the call is a true one, the voice of the Holy Spirit will roar: “Yes, you!” Even then, Starr continues, the prophet will haggle with the Holy one. “There must be someone better suited to speak for the Divine.” But the God of Love is a patient God. The God of Love calls once, twice, three times … again and again.

Often these calls come first as a call to step away from something familiar and comfortable. Stepping away from one place in your life and into another place. When we close a door, our only option in moving forward is to open another. And often that takes time.

Pastor Phil attended a seminar where the speaker opened with that very thought: When you go through a change, you are closing one door and opening another. But it does not happen instantaneously. You are standing in a hallway and the waiting in that space can feel like hell in the hallway.

It almost seems that we are standing in that hallway with Jesus in this passage this morning. And lest we think that because he is Jesus, he will not be tempted, here we have it. Of course, Jesus was tempted; and we will be, too.

This morning we stand alongside him as he is tempted and we stand by as he conquers that temptation. In this, we can know ... and we can trust ... that Jesus stands alongside us in every temptation we have faced and will face in the future. In his holy calling, Jesus takes every one of those temptations from us. He conquers them on our behalf, so that we might continue to embrace the callings God will make on our daily lives.

Lest we think we do not meet the measure of one called to God's prophetic expression of love in the world, Marabai Starr further reminds us of a prophet who entered her calling as a working-class, unmarried Jewish teenager. Who received an uninvited visit from a winged being bearing the message that she would be a vessel for the incarnation of the divine here on earth ... a message that included how much it would hurt to be his mother.

There is not a one of us who is called to everything. But every one of us is called to something. Something that will bear God's love and justice into the world. And that something will likely shift as we move through our earthly journeys. For some, it might be a loving, guiding, parent or grandparent or teacher. For another, it may be that of a loving partner, caring for a beloved through aging and health challenges. It might be that of a teacher, a musician, a cook, or a builder.

This takes us to a point on this day to remember some of my favorite quotes from someone who bravely stepped into the hallway of Jesus' calling. Tomorrow, we honor a great prophet of our country. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., tomorrow, we hear the echo of Jesus' teachings:

"That we shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

"That darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."

And "that the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

In closing, we remember Mary's response to God's call ..."Here I am." Like Mary, may God give us the ability to hear God's daily callings to bear love into the world and respond, "Here I am." May God take us by the hand and guide us into that love. And may God embolden us through our fear and hold us fast when we stumble or fall.

Amen.