

First Congregational Church Cannon Falls
Rev. Grace Anderson
March 6, 2022

Deuteronomy 26:1-1
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

“Wildernesses”

Many of us know about temptation. Anyone who has made New Year’s resolutions or given up something for Lent knows all about temptation. I gave up giving up something during Lent a long time ago knowing how New Year’s resolutions didn’t work for me either. I don’t remember all of them but I do know that one of my more supreme failures was trying to give up chocolate for Lent. That didn’t go very well to say the least.

Now, today’s story has several rich themes in which to delve including the temptations presented to Jesus by the devil. So, the first theme is the devil and concept of evil and temptation. The second, the wilderness. All of which we see and hear about throughout scripture with the devil and the wilderness being in both Christian and Jewish scripture. However, the devil is a figure not often talked about in mainline Christianity.

Now to start off, in a mainline denomination like the United Church of Christ, the devil or Satan, as personified evil, does not get too much attention. We talk about evil certainly. In our recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, we pray “and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” So, since we don’t talk about the devil or Satan all that much, who is this being and why is he in today’s story?

This question about who is the devil was raised in bible study this week. Good question and one that I find harder to answer than what is evil but let me give it a shot. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, “Satan, in the three major Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), is the prince of evil spirits and an adversary of God. Satan is traditionally understood as an angel (or sometimes a *jinnī* in Islam) who rebelled against God and was cast out of heaven with other “fallen” angels before the creation of humankind.”

My second place I go-to look up answers is the dictionary. In the Webster dictionary the devil is defined as a “personal supreme spirit of evil often represented in Christian belief as the tempter of humankind, the leader of all apostate angels, and the ruler of hell.” The devil comes by several names including Satan, Lucifer, Prince of Darkness among others.

Tempter of humankind – well that poses an interesting theological question about Jesus. If the devil is tempting Jesus, is he tempting Jesus' human side or just challenging God through Jesus? So, is Jesus fully human or fully divine or both in this scenario? That in itself could be the purpose of this story is to tell the readers, Jesus' followers just who Jesus is and whose Jesus is. One thing is clear – we see the dichotomy between the devil and the Spirit of God as Jesus as he entered into his wilderness time.

The devil keeps tempting Jesus with offers like providing Jesus an escape from this fate at the cross. The devil wanted to challenge God once again but Jesus thwarts the devil at every turn and with every challenge. In turn, Jesus does not give into the temptations but repeatedly shows his faithfulness to God. Jesus is fully aware of his trials before him but his obedience to God is stronger than any fear that he may have had.

As one commentator, Lori Brandt Hale (Feasting on the Word) wrote, "To say yes to the world (of Satan's personification of evil) would have required Jesus to say no to God, to the way of God and to an idea of God's kingdom that those followers simply did not understand. It would have required him to say no to the freedom and love for humanity that are the marks of his death and resurrection."

All of this is occurring in the wilderness – a setting that is echoed throughout scripture starting with Moses and the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Here Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days and tempted throughout but not without help of the Holy Spirit that accompanied him. A difference, though between the Israelites and Jesus is that the Israelites pretty much complained the whole time about their circumstances. Jesus on the other hand demonstrates time and time again his faithfulness to God.

It would be easy to say Israelites – bad; Jesus – good. The difficult part is admitting that we possess both sides in us. Sometimes when times are challenging, we may ask "why God, why me?" Or we may wonder, "God help me, life is too hard, make it easy for me." On the other hand, our faithfulness in God may be as solid as Jesus demonstrates to the devil.

We all have experienced our own wilderness times. It may have been during a serious illness or when a loved one died. It may be when a job is lost or a child is struggling and we feel all alone. One minute we may rail against God and the next we can't praise God enough for sticking with us through the dark time. Sometimes we emerge from our wilderness stronger for it and maybe feeling a little beaten up by the experience. Yet, we think "and by the grace of God" I made it through.

When I had COVID in October of 2020, I see that as a wilderness time if I ever saw one. Initially I was home and my daughter, with the help of some dear friends who tended to me with food, medicine and a pulsometer to measure my breathing. As my pneumonia worsened so did my breathing. Finally, my daughter and I agreed that she should call an ambulance. The lead paramedic sort of mocked me for calling suggesting that it was the nurse line telling me to call and that they always over react. By the time I reached the ambulance, the same paramedic was offering me oxygen.

I stayed in the hospital for five days and was given the best care as my daughter stayed home and worried. She also had COVID but only lost her taste and smell and couldn't visit me in the hospital. I tried to walk around the unit I was on to keep up my strength and as I did, I saw people in far more serious circumstances as they were hooked up to ventilators and multiple IV's. As I walked around the circle of the unit, I offered prayers for everyone. My faith in God in my own personal wilderness was only strengthened.

After I recovered, I learned from my daughter how many of my friends were checking in on her and providing what help they could from a distance. It is in situations like a health crisis that we may be tempted to make deals, tempted to lose faith in God or tempted to doubt that God even exists. Or our faith is stronger after experiencing the love of friends and family.

As a country and around the world, we may feel we are in a collective wilderness. With the pandemic with us in a third year, rising alarms about the fate of creation and now with the threats posed by Russia. We may feel lost, unmoored, confused, angry or maybe we are in denial and willing to make bargains to make it all go away.

I appeal to those who know how to survive in the wilderness. People who know what signs to look for to leave it safely, for physical and spiritual food to stay strong and for wisdom to calm the panic that may arise. As Christians, we have guides in the wilderness. We have places and beings to look for safety, to find spiritual food and for wisdom to calm us when we begin to panic. We have God with us every step of the way and Jesus' example of resisting temptation as we read in today's scripture. We have prayer to help us when we begin to panic.

And prayers are in no short supply especially as we pray for peace. Generation after generation has prayed for peace but that peace is shattered by bombs and violent attacks. So, what is peace in a world surrounded by violence and how do we pray for it? What are our temptations in this particular wilderness when fear is ever present? Our prayers for peace need to go beyond praying for the absence of war. Our prayers for peace need to include strength for the work to bring about peace. We need to ask for strength to call out injustices. We need to ask for strength to love our neighbor. We need to ask for strength to love ourselves so that we can bring our best selves forward into the world. We need to ask for strength and resist temptation to shout down or avoid those with whom we do not agree. This peace is not something that only occurs in the absence of tension but one that we carry in our hearts and into the world. It is a peace that shows the world *our* faithfulness in God as Jesus did in his wilderness time. May it be so. Amen.