

March 10, 2019 Psalm 91, Luke 4: 1-13 (wilderness temptations)

Identity Theft

Our times in the wilderness can enrich our lives and help to renew our confidence in God and in ourselves, making it clearer who we truly are that will help to inform the choices we make.

Recently I heard about an ice fishing derby being held on the Ottawa River off Petrie point with a few of the men describing their ice fishing huts, some sounding more like small cottages on the river complete with television. But the intent and focus was always the same, getting away from the hustle and bustle of life to simply sit in front of that hole, tugging on your line waiting for the big catch somewhere in the depths beneath you, an exercise in hope. For some people I am sure this gives them their sanity as the cold of winter seems to go on forever, especially this year. A parishioner of Will's in Pembroke, Janie, met her future husband walking along the icy shores of the Ottawa River as she meandered aimlessly amongst the ice fishing huts. Somehow the brightness and starkness of the day opened them up to finding love on that day he was fishing and they were married later that summer, a wedding I had the joy of presiding at.

The wilderness is a place that we go to find ourselves, to listen for our heart's desire. It may be a physical place, but as Thomas Merton, the famous Trappist Monk says, it is a spiritual place, a time to draw us deeper into the world. The wilderness is the place where the Holy Spirit leads Jesus, both a physical and a spiritual place, at the very beginning of his ministry as he listens for the role that he will play in God's mission immediately after he has been baptized.

We hear that it is a challenging time as he is confronted by the devil, or better named as the Tempter, who is interested in destroying his relationship with God which is central to his identity as the Son of God. At the very end of his time of fasting when he is

particularly vulnerable, he will be tempted in various ways which takes Jesus back to remembering the story of his own people as they wandered about in the wilderness.

Firstly, he is tempted to use his special power to turn a stone into bread, recreating in some way the manna that was given to the Israelites in their years in the wilderness. The Israelites were tempted to hoard the manna, the material things that were given to them, but they had to learn that all things are gifts from God.

In each temptation Jesus draws strength from the Word of God that he has learned growing up, quoting each time from the book of Deuteronomy that helped to define the values and wisdom for the people of the Covenant in a radical new way.

“It is written, one does not live by bread alone.” “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” And finally, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

In the second temptation the Tempter shows him all the kingdoms of the world and tries to entice Jesus to pursue worldly power, perhaps political power, or celebrity, or corporate power and wealth. One thing that is problematic in this story is that God is the creator of the world which includes all the systems and ‘kingdoms’, so it is not really the devil’s place to grant Jesus anything – it shows how wiley the tempter is. However, again the temptation Jesus is struggling with is to be lured away from his relationship with God and to listening for how God wants him to live his life. It is another clear attempt for Jesus’ identity to be hijacked away from the deeper vocation and call that God has laid out for Jesus to follow. Perhaps the temptation comes from a struggle with his sense of adequacy for the tasks that he will be given?

I agree fully with the descriptions of these temptations that Jesus’ endures as identity theft, the attempt of the devil (the tempter) to destroy the very centre of Jesus’ heart and soul which is solidified through his relationship with God. It invites us to consider all of the ways in which are own struggles with our adequacy and confidence

make us vulnerable to advertisers and so much other rhetoric in the media. Nine times out of ten the goal of such ads is to create in us a sense of lack and inadequacy, followed by the implicit promise that purchasing the advertised product will relieve our insecurity.

This comment comes from David Lose, an American Lutheran Theologian reflecting on the politics in his own country back in 2016 but lived out in the policies since then– “consider how many of the messages from the candidates running for president seek to create in us insecurity and fear. Terrorism, immigrants, corporations, joblessness, low wages, high taxes, the wealthy, the poor – depending on which candidate you listen to the target shifts, but the message is the same: you should be afraid because you do not and are not enough; elect me and I’ll keep you safe.” It is something to keep in mind here in Canada as we enter into another season of political campaigning.

We also know how the whole issue of ‘identity theft’ has become so important today on a literal level as we are being taught each week of a new scheme or new trick to get us to give away information about ourselves, our bank accounts, or to click on email links or respond to fear inducing phone calls from threatening sounding people, all with intent of stealing our identity. Mark Zuckerberg, one of the wealthiest men in the world, just recently promised that he was going to turn a whole new page for Facebook users guaranteeing more security and privacy especially around one’s identity and who owns our personal information. Sounds good but within moments, commentators who know how he operates say they don’t believe a word of it.

So, it seems that in this current world we live in, it becomes even more important to know who we are, to learn about who to trust to really keep ourselves and our families safe, to develop a more profound sense of who we are as children of God, as people who can safely draw our strength and reassurance from God who has created us.

The temptations that Jesus' endured not only in his time in the wilderness, but throughout his ministry and especially when he was tempted again on the cross to question his faith in God, to let it go of this relationship, is at the heart of his ministry which is able to bring salvation, courage and strength to us. In Jesus' life he took on the suffering, rejections and temptations of humanity and even walked through the portals of death as we will all one day. Moreover, God raised Jesus from the dead in order to demonstrate that God's love is more powerful than all the hate in the world and that the life God offers is more powerful even than death and all those forces that would harm that beautiful love that pulses within our very veins and throughout the universe.

Jesus' faith in the power of God's love for us and for the world is what saves us, is what can make us secure in our identity, to know that we are good enough just as we are. And this is why we gather for worship each week, why we join with each other at the Table of our Lord, Jesus Christ who provides us the food, the simple bread and fruit of the earth, to renew our confidence and to remind who we are as the beloved, blessed and protected people of the living God.

So today I pray that our worship helps us to become stronger and more confident as people of faith, as people of the Word. May the words and melodies of Psalm 91, so cleverly quoted by the tempter as he tried to get Jesus to test God by hurling himself off the temple, become now for us words of comfort and even joy as we trust our lives to God and Christ who has shown us the way to know abundant life.

Sing Psalm 91 – He will Raise You Up on Eagles' Wings