

SERMON: Led and Fed by the Spirit

TEXT: Matthew 4:1-11

Years ago, at my last church, we held Wednesday evening Lenten activities. On Ash Wednesday, we were to think of something we needed to give up – not just to give up for Lent, but to give up permanently – something that we needed to let go of, to be free of, or to repent of. On small slips of paper each person wrote something down, folded the slip of paper, and dropped it in a saucepan. Without ever being looked at by anyone else, the papers were burned, and then we were marked with the ashes as a sign of our repentance. My young daughter enthusiastically embraced this task. Without any hesitation or fear that she was revealing a dark secret, she boldly expressed her need to give up... school!

It was probably not an unusual answer for a typical ten-year-old. In fact, it is true of many of us that we would like to take the easy way out most of the time. Wouldn't it be nice if you could just snap your fingers and know what you needed to know without every having to go to school or take a test? Dare I say all of us have wished for a weight loss pill that would melt the pounds without diet or exercise? I know my son would have liked to learn how to ride a bike without ever falling down and skinning your knee. And I've always wanted to be able to sit

down at the piano and play – you know, without ever having to take lessons or practice scales.

Of course, that's not the way it works. Anything worthwhile requires hard work and discipline as well as some suffering and wandering in the wilderness, if you will. I know a young man who has cerebral palsy and has great difficulty walking. He might not be quite so crippled, except that when he was a baby, his mother couldn't bear to exercise his legs as the doctors instructed because it was so painful – physically painful for him and emotionally painful for her.

Most of us go to church because we believe that following Christ is a worthwhile thing. So it stands to reason that there will be hard work and discipline, and even some suffering and wandering in the wilderness to be a true Christian. But we take issue with God on this point. Somehow we think it shouldn't be hard to be a Christian. Why can't we just say we believe and gain entrance into paradise where nothing bad will ever happen to us?

By the same token, why did Jesus have to endure hunger and temptation for forty days in the wilderness? Why did even he have to be tested? Of course, the devil is the one who tempts Jesus, saying "If you are the Son of God, command

this stone to become a loaf of bread.” However, note that it is God – in the person of the Holy Spirit – who leads Jesus into the wilderness in the first place! It seems that God and the devil are in cahoots. After all, God is really expecting the same thing of Jesus as is the devil: “If you are an obedient son, you will resist the devil’s temptation.” God and the devil are both asking Jesus to prove himself in one way or another.

It’s hard to imagine having to go without food, without shelter, and without any companionship for forty days. But this is not unlike an old Native American custom where the boys who were reaching the age of puberty would go away in solitude to prepare for manhood. Alone in the wilderness, the test was to see if they could survive. Indian legend tells the story of one young boy who hiked into a beautiful valley, green with trees, bright with flowers. There he fasted. But on the third day, as he looked up at the surrounding mountains, he noticed one tall rugged peak, capped with dazzling white snow. “I will test myself against that mountain,” he thought. He put on his buffalo hide shirt, threw his blanket over his shoulders, and set off to climb the peak. When he reached the top he stood on the rim of the world. He could see forever, and his heart swelled with pride.

Then he heard a rustle at his feet, and looking down, he saw a snake. Before he could move, the snake spoke. *“I am about to die,”* said the snake. *“It is too cold for me up here and I am freezing. There is no food and I am starving. Put me under your shirt and take me down to the valley.”* “No,” said the boy, “I know your kind. You are a rattlesnake. If I pick you up, you will bite, and your bite will kill me.” *“Not so,”* said the snake, *“I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, you will be special. I will not harm you.”* The youth resisted awhile, but this was a very persuasive snake with beautiful markings. Finally, the boy tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. There he laid it gently on the grass. Suddenly, the snake coiled, rattled, and attacked, biting the boy on the leg. “But you promised,” cried the boy. As the snake slithered away he turned and said, *“You knew what I was when you picked me up.”*

A snake is always a snake. The devil is always evil. But God’s Spirit is always present.

Jesus had to be tempted in order to learn how to depend on God. And though he did not ask to be sent into the wilderness, Jesus accepted that such trials could not be avoided as he followed God’s will.

When it comes to us and our wilderness experiences, I'm not convinced that God inflicts those painful circumstances upon us. I'm more inclined to say that it is the nature of the world in which we live. There are all kinds of dangers which we cannot avoid, and no one is exempt.

We can be assured, however, that the Holy Spirit is present with us through all things. The Spirit didn't lead Jesus into the wilderness and then just drop him off and leave him there. The Spirit led him through – all the way through – never leaving or forsaking him. And I have to believe that with every appearance of the devil and every temptation that Jesus faced, God's Spirit strengthened him to recognize the evil, to refuse the offers, and to resist the temptations.

Not only was the Spirit with Jesus to strengthen him, but he had scripture, too, on his side, which provided ready answers for the devil, who also knew scripture, but used it to manipulate, to trick Jesus into succumbing to temptation. I have asked us to take on the discipline of reading through the Gospel of Matthew, but you may have noticed that I haven't stated the purpose for this. Well, let's just say it's a good place to start, it's a good habit to have, and it's how the Spirit feeds us.

We also come to the Lord's Table to be fed. Through his body and blood, we are nourished, strengthened, and made one with Christ and all the saints. In all of our wilderness wanderings, may we know that the Spirit is present to lead us and feed us and help us to be faithful... to the glory of God!

AMEN.