

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent I, February 21, 2010, dedicated to my aunt, Janice Kellermeyer Higgins, one of the finest followers of Jesus it has been my honor to know, and always to the glory of God!

“An Exciting Faith Brings Friendship in the Wilderness”

Luke 4:1-13

***(Part II of VIII in sermon series
“An Exciting Faith”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The conversational temptation of Jesus by the Devil in the wilderness is the perfect setting in which to enter our Lenten journey. Following his glorious baptism in the water of the Jordan River, surrounded by the crowds and celebrated by the voice of God proclaiming from the heavens, “This is my beloved son. In you I am well pleased!” and filled by the Holy Spirit, Jesus goes into the wilderness. No food. No crowds. No water. But, apparently, Jesus is also not alone. He is accompanied by the one known by many names – the Devil, a.k.a., Satan, a.k.a. the Slanderer, a.k.a. the Adversary, a.k.a. the One Who Trips People Up. We will call him the Tempter.

Remember, the timing of this temptation is perfect. Jesus has not preached a sermon, cast out any demon or healed anyone who was sick. To our knowledge, he has been born, raised and

baptized. Very few people have any knowledge of this Messiah-in-the-making. Let the temptation games begin!

First, the Tempter suggests the hungry Jesus turn stones into bread. It is a private temptation. It is a temptation to bribery. What harm would it do? He would be fed. No one would be hurt. The one who helps everyone with everything would take care of himself for a change. Jesus won't be bribed. Jesus responds, "One does not live by bread alone." Unless one knows Deuteronomy 8:3 and Moses' response to the people's exodus in the desert and God's gift of manna, and the great deliverer's comment that goes on after the opening phrase, "But by every word that comes from the mouth of God," the opening just hangs in the barren atmosphere. But the Tempter, who quotes scripture quite adeptly, knows this passage. For all we know, he was standing with Moses when he delivered it generations before!

Second, the Tempter rolls out a political temptation. This temptation is to compromise. Showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world from a mind's eye view far above, he offers all these kingdoms to the kingship of Jesus. He says, "All of this is mine and I will give it all to you. All you need to do is worship me." Wow! Such mighty power! The Tempter is saying, "What harm would it do to achieve good for all the people of the world?" But Jesus won't be compromised. Drawing from Deuteronomy 6:13, he responds essentially, "God is God. Right is right. Wrong is wrong." Worship God only. No others before God. No room for compromise on this one.

For the third and final temptation, the Tempter turns to religion. Taking Jesus up to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, and (now) only quoting scripture, the Tempter challenges Jesus to throw himself off the temple, allowing the angels to save his life. Jesus is tempted to do something sensational for his people. Once again, Jesus rebukes the Tempter. He says, "You must not test the Lord your God." Jesus knows scripture, too. If there is going to be a battle with the Bible, I would trust Jesus to deliver the final word. Turning to Deuteronomy 6:16, Jesus responds that God should not be tested. God and his

beloved one will not be coerced into sensationalism.

This conversation of temptation ends when the Tempter finally leaves Jesus alone. But we are told he was out of sight, not gone for good. He was only waiting for an opportunity somewhere down the line to return to pick up the conversation again. Now Jesus is ready to preach, cast out demons, heal and move into ministerial mode.

No one can read these temptations of Jesus and say we do not have an exciting faith. In the wilderness wild things happen. So many questions arise as we read this passage. For example, why is it that it seems like temptation and struggle enter into our lives right after we have had a really high moment? Something good happens and we get hit with something bad. Jesus receives the power of the Holy Spirit and immediately gets challenged by the power of the devil. Why is it we seem most vulnerable to criticism and pain when we are feeling pretty good about ourselves and our situation?

As far as the temptations of Christ, remember he is tempted by bribery, compromise and sensationalism. Have you ever faced such temptations? How does temptation appear in your life? A simple answer might be the constant barrage of advertising. We receive constant daily bombardment of messages with temptations for possessing cars and other large ticket items, sex on demand and eternal youth.

The messages are clear from the Tempter of our culture and times – “I will give you whatever you want . . . for a certain price.” We can all agree that we are in the economic mess we have today because of greed, avarice and lies. We may not agree where the source of these is centered, but the tempters of our times are everywhere present trying to sell us “things” which may not actually be good for us.

For example, turning stones into bread may solve an immediate hunger problem, but it creates a problem of rock-gut and makes it hard to digest the next meal. Passing desert stones is even harder

than passing kidney stones! Since we are often tempted through our strengths and not our weaknesses (ie. Jesus' abilities to have sovereignty over the world in temptation #2), we get sucked into things which do not serve God's will to promote life and health and wholeness. When we use our power for the Tempter and not for God, we get trapped into a confusion of whom we are serving and how well it will end for us.

Temptation is like a drug. The first time you yield to it, it can make you feel powerful. Once you have tasted this power, you want more of it. But, over time, it can drain you, make you nuts and turn you on yourself and those you love. The worst folks to have power are those who have no prayer life and no real relationship with God. If they have power, they believe they can do whatever they want, whenever they want to. From this point, loneliness and isolation can overtake a person in this position. Without God, things begin to spin out of control.

What is exciting about our faith in the face of temptation is that God is always present and ready to befriend us in wilderness times. No matter where we are and what we are up against, we are never alone. In the wilderness, we have the comfort of those who have walked the lonesome valleys before us, most significantly, Jesus the Christ.

In Luke 4:1-13, Jesus is sent into the desert in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the advocate, the comforter, the one who never abandons us. In the midst of the Tempter's conversation, the Holy Spirit is present to Jesus. Then as the temptations strip away one at a time, Jesus is cared for by the angels of mercy. Truly, Jesus is never alone. Temptation brings both challenges and friendship in the desert.

How about you? In the wilderness experiences of your life, have you felt the power and presence of friends? Have you felt the surrounding presence of God's Spirit and God's angels? Through the years, I have felt peace in knowing that God sends friends to minister to me in wilderness times. A call, a card, a kindness come my way when I most need it and least expect it. Years ago in

Nicaragua, while serving on a mission trip, I found myself overwhelmed by the poverty, people everywhere and the crying need around me. In addition, my Spanish was so poor I couldn't really communicate with the people we were serving.

Finally, I took a break, went out on the hillside behind the hospital, put my head between my knees and simultaneously prayed and wept.

Just then, I heard the voice of a young boy standing a few feet away. He asked, "Mister, are you okay?" His English was perfect. As I opened my teary eyes and looked into his eyes, I realized I was speaking with a blue-eyed, black-haired Nicaraguan boy about 8 years old. It turns out he was from Bluefields, a Moravian community on the Gulf Coast in which all the people spoke English. We talked for some time and threw a baseball back and forth. Then I returned to work. Although he had come to the mountains in the middle of the country with his mother and they were staying in the mission with us, I never saw him again. God sent an angel, a friend in trying times.

How often have you experienced friendship in the wilderness of your life? How often has "an angel of the Lord" appeared to you when you most needed it and least expected it? My guess is, more often than you know. Because each encounter every day is somehow touched by God. Whether we know it or not, whether we name it and claim it, God is ministering to us through others and through us to others.

Take time in this Lenten season, this "springtime" of God's love to open your eyes, your hearts and your minds to the amazing friendships you have and give thanks to God for sending your friends to you when you most need it and least expect it. Open and close each day with a prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God. Ask for a blessing. Ask for God to stretch you a little further to grant and receive grace. Ask God to lay God's hand upon you and keep you from harm.

You will discover that your life is graced by God and you are

given daily strength to overcome the temptations of the flesh and spirit that are thrust upon you. The wilderness brings friendship, if we but open ourselves to the amazing power of God to guide us in troubled times. Amen.

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