

Readied for Temptation 2017

John baptizes Jesus, and a voice from heaven says “this is my child, marked by my love. Delight of my life.”

Then, immediately following this proclamation of loving and claiming Jesus as one of God’s own – Jesus is led up by the spirit, into the wilderness. This is where our Gospel lesson begins today.

Matthew suggests that this temptation was destiny. That Jesus was led by the spirit. Now, this is not a new concept. It parallels the trials of Abraham. And the fasting - - - along with the forty days and nights - - - are also familiar in the trials of Noah, Moses, Elijah, and others.

Today’s Gospel contains an element found in many Greco-Roman biographies and other literary journeys. Here in the center - - - of Jesus’ odyssey - - - an ordeal story in the form of a dialogue, where the hero is tested. A test which encapsulates - and foreshadows – both the life of the hero, and the destiny that awaits.

In this dialogue, we find Jesus and Satan lobbing scripture at one another like hand grenades in an attempt to shut the other down and answer the question once and for all – who is the most powerful. I could not help but notice the similarity of this exchange and a more modern literary device our young people will have to explain to you, called a rap battle, because, well – it really is one. But you’ll have to ask them about it.

Our reading could have been much shorter. Matthew’s gospel focuses on the righteousness of Jesus, which is well established by the time this story appears, so Jesus didn’t really have anything to prove. Satan has his long demands including “command these stones to turn to bread” and rather than quoting scripture, Jesus could said “no.” Then Satan goes on and on and says “throw yourself down!” and starts quoting the Psalms, and Jesus could have said “Nope. Not feeling it.” Then Satan waves his arms across the kingdoms-of-the-world and says “worship me!” and Jesus could have said – simply –

“No.

Leave.”

Which he did say – but not so simply.

It caught my attention that Jesus felt obligated to explain himself. To look the tempter, the accuser, the one who blocks our path – to look Satan in the eye, and quote scripture? I wondered – why go to all of that trouble? Satan obviously knows the scriptures, choosing from Deuteronomy – which is the most quoted of the Torah in the whole New Testament.

But then I remembered – Jesus was exhausted. He’d been fasting a long time, and the story says - he was famished. It was in that state that the devil got to him. Exhausted, hungry, alone.

It is in these places of weakness that we are most vulnerable. The voices come and tell us we are not enough. We are about to lose. It scares us, and we are tempted to try to fill ourselves, to binge on things that do not nourish us, because the battle is too hard, and it feels like an easy quick fix.

So we have a drink, or raise our voices. We give up, give in, gossip, leave, or any number of things we do when our security and control are threatened and our instinct is to grab it back. These are strong forces, and it's not so easy to "just say no" - or we would

But we don't always react. Even when we are suffering, like Jesus was today, even in this suffering – that we cannot prevent - we have our safety nets. Sometimes we know ourselves well enough to see the trials coming, and we are ready. As a parent, and in my life, I have learned to watch for the times when I am vulnerable, to look for the red flags, and employ simple mantras or prayers like "Stop. Don't react – respond." And "Listen." And "God is God, Heidi... not you."

In addition to scripture, there are entire industries of recovery and self-help that provides tools and tricks, anchors and mantras, all designed to pull us back. Employing those habits has kept the faithful stable on many occasions. In dialogues and situations where just saying no would not have been enough – and besides - it was too late for no.

The psalmist today implores us to not be like the horse or mule, who must be fitted with bit and bridle, to stay near God - - but sometimes we are. Sometimes we need reminders.

And I can't help but wonder if that was why Jesus had to break out his notes, flash cards, words of scripture and assurances; That - as famished as he was – he was faithful enough to employ the reminders - - this is not about his own power, but God's.

At last Wednesday morning's service here we talked some about what it is like – looking back on our lives, and recognizing moments where we got through ordeals we did not believe we would survive. We were sitting there among friends, held in prayer and caring, victorious, yet showing the battle scars of many lifetimes - - and today's angels who tended to Jesus after his ordeal were called to my mind, flocking here in the pews. We would not have all fit on the head of a pin, to be sure, but there we were. Faithful survivors of the wilderness, companions on the continuing journey full of uncertainty, pain, love and hope, waiting on one another.

As we enter into this season of Lent, I invite you to adopt a practice of holiness. Of study. Of waiting on one another. Come to church. Come to dinner. Say your prayers. Ask for help.

We are marked by God's love, and God delights in us. That is the beginning, the middle, and the end of our epic stories. Let's pray.

God our lives are in your hands, and for that we give you thanks. Amen