

TEMPTATION IN THE WILDERNESS MATTHEW 4: 1-11

For most of us, the tempter, the terror, come by night.

The gut searing questions that burn off the waters of our baptism, and leave us dry, salt-crusted, croaking out our questions to the unanswering darkness and longing for the light

The tempter, the terror, come by night.

There, however, in that wilderness place
the tempter and the terror come by day.
In the unforgiving, scorching, blistering heat.

No northern wilderness, this. No Yukon scene where the wilderness is a delight, where people choose it for life, for inspiration, where the beauty sustains, fills and fulfils even while it tests the body and soul.

This wilderness is barren and dry, dangerous and frightening – at least by day.

By night – ah, that is another thing altogether.
The desert nights are lovely. Lush and damp and filled with the life that hides itself by day.

No. The terror and tempter come here by day.

Jesus, Matthew tells us, Jesus is led there by the Spirit. Fresh from his baptism....robes dripping with the waters of the Jordan and the sound of the Voice, liquid and lovely, washing over him still: “This is my child, my beloved with whom I am well pleased”

The Spirit, the very one who came to him there at the Jordan as a dove
that same Spirit leads him next, to the wilderness - to be tempted.
Does the dove remain? Fluttering somewhere nearby? Are there ravens for him as there were for Elijah, when he needed them? The text doesn't say.
Does the tempter come in some bodily form – a bird of prey? A jackal, waiting for him to faint from the heat and then pounce? As a mirage, promising the eye everything, delivering disappointment and the shame of being betrayed by his own senses?

The text simply doesn't say.

You know what else it doesn't say?

It doesn't say that he was there alone. Isn't that shocking? It was to me. None – not one – of the gospels says that he was in that wilderness alone.

I'm going to suggest this morning that THIS is the final and greatest temptation of them all; and it's not Jesus, but rather we who are called to stand before its heat and answer to it.

The lie beneath the lies
the temptation at the root of it all
is the temptation to believe that we are alone in the wilderness; that one super hero must save the day or we perish.

I have read this countless times....preached it at least once a year for over 25 years and only this year did I realize that he need not be alone here. That the scenario of the solitary hero taking on the world is what I have brought to the text – with my own eyes, schooled as they are by this culture and the values, the stories, the mythology I have been taught.

It's my own eyes, dried out as they have become by the hot air of the stories we all tell ourselves. Hot air pumped into the pontoons that buoy up the world as we know it and that bobbing along, suits our purposes.

What if we dared to let the air out, let the stories sink or swim on their own? Get a soaking in a fresh reading?

What if he's not alone in that wilderness????

What if, with him while he fasts and struggles there – at the edge of the desert, watching, praying, what if there is also with him the beginning of the group of friends and followers who one day would answer the tempter themselves...fail....and still become his body in the world?

What if it were like that?

Nowhere in this text does it paint him completely alone. To read that into it is to fall into the tempter's snare; The lie beneath the lies. This world and the spiritual life is NOT, as the tempter would have you believe, is NOT the lone individual pitted against a hostile environment – that is a European, North American and gendered vision of reality. Rooted in power and the hierarchy that power feeds on. NO. No. That is the lie beneath the lies. The life of the Spirit is a life of community. Of family. Of oneness with one another and with our creator. We are not struggling alone. We are part of a whole and called to live life that way. Jesus came to name that, to claim it and to break down the barriers and walls that the lie has created, keeping some outside and feeling alone.

Jesus is beginning his ministry. Reaching out with heart and soul, imagination and intelligence and intuition for God's will for his life. To say that much is at stake is to understate in the extreme. The very shape of the world hangs in the balance....floats there in the sea of possibility and so frighteningly dependent on the waves of human choice...his choice.....

How does he deal with the tempter's promises? What if....what if with him, in that desert place, with him in the discernment, is a cluster of support...what if his mother is there...and some early friends, maybe those who had been there at the Jordan, and hearing the voice as well, had followed to see what would come next?

They may have brought water, and the silent bodily presence that kept him grounded and able to resist the tempter's sleek and seductive voice. What torment of body and soul he withstands, we'll never know. Nor, truly, will they, but they watch, silent and still as though treading water in the hot sand. They'd be frightened at the intensity, but they would place their own bodies in the way of the emptiness that threatens to swallow him whole.

One temptation. They watch.

Two.

He's exhausted, he's weak. He's vulnerable.

Three.

How many times can one person go down and still not drown?

“Look” the voice is so reasonable. “Look...it doesn't have to be this way. Give in just a little. It's just you and me...it'll be so easy. No one will get hurt, no one will ever know. And you'll be able to reach so many more people this way...”

He looks on with dry satisfaction as Jesus writhes, eyes watering with the pain and dark circles of sweat staining the armpits of his robe. He looks on, he can afford to bide his time. The white foam of spittle gathers at the corners of his mouth. He presses a bit.

“Look – isn't that a pool of water? There – yes – shimmering in the heat. I bet you could walk right across that – think what a show – I mean miracle – that would be. Cool the soles of your feet too”

And on it went.

With him there, as he wrestles with the shape of the world to come with him is a community of care.

In his very bones and the juices that still flow through his parched body – with him in that primal way, in his very flesh, are those who have come before him...their voices a river flowing on and on...buoying him up when the undertow in the tempter's stagnant pool threatens to suck him under. There is Moses, the prophets...the voices of those who wrote and spoke the word through the centuries:

“one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”

“do not put the Lord your God to the test”

“Worship the Lord your God and serve only God”

they whisper, they surround and fill him. He is not alone.

And there, at the edge of the desert – watching, terrified, and proud, ready....is his mother. This is flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone – if her were YOUR son, where would you be? Home in Nazareth? I don't think so.

What if she is there, at the edge, praying for him, willing him to resist. Recalling for him the words she sang to him in the cradle, on her knee, in her kitchen.... *“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour....God puts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up those of low degree...God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts...”*

She wills him to remember. She prays that he will focus, will stay strong, will let the teachings of his youth and his own sense of his calling; keep his head above the tidal wave of temptation that keeps slamming into his soul.

And what if his fast was the kind of fast practised by Middle Eastern people today; sunup to sundown....and what if the night brought not only cool moist relief from the sun, but also friends to sit with him, and the permission to take the simple relief of water? What if, with the setting of the sun, friends brought water, bread, a little wine? And the gift of companionship, ...and what if together they upheld him as he talked out his doubts, his weakness, and as he reaches for the truth of his ministry and the strength to withstand what it would cost?

We don't know.

But that's the point. We don't know.

This morning, I call *you* though, not to fall into temptation. In particular, this fourth and I believe greatest temptation - of believing that you are alone; that the wilderness has no life, no hope, no bread for your journey.

There is bread in the wilderness.

There is hope and there is life

The vision is no longer one of one solitary hero – either Jesus or you. The way of God, the way of salvation, the way of faith is the way of community. Wholeness of being for you and for the world.

You are not alone – whatever wilderness, whatever temptation you face - there is bread and wine for you – community, and joy, friendship and the abiding assurance that you are never alone. Let this table be for us a table where this truth is proclaimed and consumed and shared with the world.

Amen