

“Alone with Oneself”

Psalm 32, Matthew 4: 4-11, Lent 1/A

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The Lenten journey begins with an invitation to consider ones' mortality. On Ash Wednesday we receive a tangible sign of our humanity, the mark of ashes on the forehead. We are told, "From ashes you have come, and to ashes you shall return." This year I was not able to participate in this ritual. I was home fighting the flu. Illness, whether it is the flu or something more chronic, also helps us to get us in touch with our mortality. One moment you are well and the next you are completely at the mercy of this illness that has invaded your body. You find that the only way to wellness is to let go and to allow it to run its course.

It's not easy to confront one's mortality. Given the choice, I imagine there is any number of things we would rather do. Jesus finds himself in a similar position as he prepares to begin his ministry. Not yet dry from his baptismal soaking, we are told that the Holy Spirit leads him into the desert for a period of discernment and self-reflection. Matthew says the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for forty days. We are not sure if he spent exactly forty days away. "Forty days" is often "Bible speak" for a long time. Never the less, what is important to note is that before Jesus was able to begin his ministry, he needed some time away to be alone with himself.

In order to fully embrace the ministry to which he had been called, Jesus first spends time alone with himself, to pray, to ponder, to listen and to let go. He does not complain or resist when the Spirit leads him into the wilderness. There would be many times in his ministry when Jesus would take time away for prayer, renewal and reflection. Whenever God calls us to a significant change in our lives, it is essential to get away, to devote time to prayer and reflection. Our spiritual well being depends on our resisting the temptation to run from such a discipline. Our culture does not encourage such things. Spending time away in quiet meditation seems frivolous. To insist you can not begin an important project until you have spent a significant time alone with oneself makes no sense to people who live moment to moment, filling every waking minute with something new to do. When Jesus gets to the showdown with the Devil, it becomes clearer why he needed this time to himself.

Before Jesus is able to return from the desert he has an encounter with the devil. Usually we speak of encounters with the holy. This time, he faces the tempter. The preacher and teacher Fred Craddock says, "The account directly spoke and speaks to a church whose own faithfulness is forged again and again in the desert." Jesus goes to the wilderness because he is faithful and in this faithfulness, the devil tries to tear Jesus away from his ministry. After this time away, Jesus is vulnerable. He is famished, both physically and emotionally, as one would expect. It is at such times that we are tempted, when we are physically, spiritually or emotionally exhausted and our defenses are down. This is when we are tempted to listen to advice that would not make sense at other times, to act in a

way that we would not otherwise act. To put our trust in something or someone that we might otherwise steer clear of.

We can understand why we might face temptations, but why Jesus. Why was Jesus tempted? Craddock says, “temptation indicates strength, not weakness. One is tempted only to do that which lies within one’s capacity. The greater one’s capacities, the greater one’s temptations. The fierceness of Jesus’ desert struggle is testimony to his power.” Our temptations may affect a few people. Jesus knows that if he succumbs to the Devil’s temptations, it will effect his entire ministry. To hear the story and to take the temptations literally is to miss the point. Each temptation is a metaphor for temptations we all might face. We are not tempted to literally turn stones into bread; however we may be tempted to act in self-serving ways. We may not be tempted to bow down before the Devil in order to rule all the kingdoms of the world, however we know what it is like to experienced human lust for power and dominance. We might never be tempted to make a spectacular leap from the pinnacle of a Temple, however we all long at times to be noticed or valued.

Temptations are very real. Every day we are tempted to act in ways that will have a real and lasting impact on our own lives and others. To whom do you turn when you are tempted? What helps you keep grounded to make life giving choices? We are not often as clear-headed or decisive as Jesus was. We need people we trust to help us battle temptation. Perhaps you don’t believe in the Devil, but I believe there are forces at work in our lives that are no less insidious. The tempter counts on our lack of spiritual fitness to lead us away from doing what is just and right and good. The tempter hopes we won’t submit to a Lenten journey of renewal and self-reflection that we will slack off, leaving ourselves vulnerable.

Every time we neglect our spiritual life we invite the tempter in. Every time we negate our own power, stay silent in the face of injustice, allow someone else to make a decision we know is not right, we are giving in to the tempter. Jesus was no match for the Devil because he understood the true source of his power. Jesus could not be moved to do the Devil’s bidding no matter how sweet he made the deal sound. We too have the power to face and defeat temptation when we recognize the source of our power. Jesus did not fight temptation alone and neither can we. We need the Holy Spirit’s help. We need the comfort and encouragement of trusted companions. We need the wisdom and advice of the elders to fight against temptation.

Our ability to resist temptations is not automatic. Jesus understood his baptism would not be enough for him to do what he was called to do. He would need to be strong, emotionally and spiritually in order to fulfill his mission. Jesus did not shy away from testing or temptation. He knew he had God on his side and he would prevail. If we neglect our spiritual life, if we do not keep our spiritual tanks full, we won’t have what we need when temptation strikes.

The decisions we face in our lives are not unlike the ones put before Jesus in the desert. On their face, they sounded reasonable enough. What the Devil wanted was for Jesus to try to be like God. Do the things I propose and you will be like God. Fred Craddock says, "Jesus has before him three excellent offers: Turn stones to bread. In a world of unbelievable hunger, why not? Leap from the pinnacle of the temple. In a world callous to sermon and lesson, why not a coercive shock into belief? Enter the political arena. In a world of slavery, war, oppression and disregard for life and rights, why not?" Matthew uses the story of these temptations to teach us not about Jesus' ability to resist the whiles of the devil, but to teach us something important about the nature and shape of his ministry.

Jesus will soon preach good news to the poor and release to the captives. He will heal the sick and call into discipleship those who are outcasts and despised by others. He is about to turn the world on its head and it is inevitable that the forces that traffic in human misery and seek to keep the downtrodden where they belong will try any means necessary to turn him from this ministry. Being able to resist these temptations before he has even had the chance to begin his ministry, helps us to see what Jesus' ministry will be like. He did not come simply to feed people or to do dramatic things or to create a new political party. He came to do much more than that, more than even the devil can understand.

Jesus survives these temptations because he understands something critical about himself. He understands that he did not come to be like God or to be God. He came to do the will of God. He does not avoid temptation. He does not avoid the difficult journey of self-reflection. Jesus understood what is so difficult for us to understand. I am not God and I am not meant to act like God. I am however, to seek the will of God and to act accordingly. Whenever we start thinking we are God and not God's servants, we get into the most trouble.

Jesus invites us to follow him on this wilderness journey. He understands the power and possibility in this gift of spiritual renewal. Being alone with oneself for any length of time can be challenging. So few of us make this a priority in our lives. Perhaps that is the beauty and benefit of the Sabbatical time that you are about to bestow upon both of your ministers. It is an invitation for us to journey to the wilderness. I hear God calling me to be alone with myself for a period of time to examine where and how God continues to call me into ministry. This time away will help me reflect on how I am tempted to ignore God, when I want to be like God. The Sabbatical time is like a journey into the wilderness where we are not distracted by the cares and worries of the world, where we can spend time alone in the silence, in reflection and prayer. It is a not something that should only be made available to ministers. I would wish this for any of you. At the end of this time away, we might be tempted to hurry too quickly back into the rat race, to neglect our prayer life, to forget the benefit of rest. However, like Jesus, if we have used this wilderness time well, our spiritual tanks will be filled, we will have renewed and ready to do God's work, and we will have what it takes to resist the powers of evil. We will be better equipped to discern the difference between our will and God's will. This is my hope and prayer for such a wilderness time. Today's lesson reminds me how

necessary this time away can be, not to become an agent of the devil, but a true partner in ministry. May it be so! Amen