

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr David Pettit
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Luke 4: 1-14

Have you ever had a conversation that you can't shake? Maybe you made a mistake, you felt bad, someone was angry, a boss came down hard on you, or a friend had cross words. Have you ever had a conflict or hurt someone or been hurt by someone, and you can't stop thinking about it? It robs you of sleep. You feel it in your gut, or chest, or your lower back, perhaps. Do you ever feel the pressure or impulse to make it better or to please, or to defend yourself?

I ask these questions, because I think moments of conflict, unresolved stress, or guilt, or righteous anger, they tap into a certain energy – the desire to be loved, to be liked, to be respected, appreciated, honored, thought well of, successful, to be safe. And those moments of conflict complicate those desires, don't they? You want to be thought well of, not resented, or criticized, or looked down upon. Sometimes those feelings and stresses are hard to shake off.

I think of Jesus about to embark on his ministry. Coming out of the shadows of being a carpenter, and forging a path that taps into all the expectations of a messiah, a savior, a hero—someone who is respected, honored, praised, loved. Did he embark on this journey without a thought or care, like David who seems to march out against Goliath with some kind of righteous indignation and no real second thought? Or were there questions that haunted him the back of his mind? Was he like Moses who carried insecurities about whether he would speak well enough, if people would follow him, respect him, heed his voice?

What worries crept up on him in his sleep? Did he have dreams of standing in front of a crowd in his pajamas, and trying to speak but nothing came out, or couldn't find his notes, or remember his speech? Did he dream of commanding demons, but the demons would not listen, and everyone walked away having lost faith in him?

What worries robbed him of sleep? What worries have robbed you of sleep over the years?

I remember when I started in ministry straight out of college. I poured myself into it. I wanted to be successful. I wanted to make a difference. And success in ministry, as I understood it, meant you had people following you, people liked you, hung on your words, considered you wise, supported you, gave money to finance

the ministries you dreamed up. But, in reality, I came from western NY, was voted class quietest senior year. My resume had little on it. I wasn't that creative charismatic leader. But I knew how to work hard. So that is what I did. I worked hard. Worked long hours.

My dad had trained me that work was not just about putting in a few hours, you put in the hours it took to get the job done. But I had not learned, nor have I since, what exactly that means in terms of ministry and people and relationships. Relationships can't be glued back together like wood can. Rough spots in character do not sand out as easy as they do in wood. As a carpenter, I wonder if Jesus had to learn similar lessons. And while people respected my hard work, I think they probably looked at me like I was a kid who was young, green, with a lot to learn about people and life and ministry.

Well, it came towards the end of my first year of youth ministry and having worked hard trying to accomplish something, to build a program, to justify my employment, I had not taken a day off, because the job did not feel done, so I just kept working. But, I had vacation time to use. And I had to be up in the Adirondacks for a YL leadership retreat. So, I decided I would go up early to the Adirondacks and I'd go hiking.

On the night before I left town, I had a parent of a middle schooler vent at me; she was angry. She had a middle school student, who was probably not unlike who I was in middle school; awkward and a little goofy. He came home upset from an event from something another kid did, and she let me have it as if I solely responsible. During that 4 and ½ hour drive up to the mountains and the hike in to the wilderness, I was unable to shake it. Felt the heaviness in my chest, kept replaying it in my mind. I had exhausted myself all year, trying to justify my existence. It felt like I had little to show for it, and my model for the successful leader was someone who built big programs, and who was liked and praised by others. This angry mother made me feel as though I was a complete failure.

Now Jesus seemed to have more successful beginnings with his ministry than I did. So perhaps it is unfair to the messiah to compare him to a youth pastor just starting out. Furthermore, he did have that divinity thing working for him and all. But our creeds and theology say that his divinity did not lessen his humanity. And so, it does make me wonder what Jesus was feeling at the beginning of his ministry. Did conflict and opposition keep him up at night? Did he worry how to say what he wanted to say? Did he wonder how people would receive him? Did the fear of failure nag at him? Did the expectations of family and community weigh on his

shoulders? Did he want to please the crowds; to be spoken well of; to make a difference?

I know such worries plagued me as I hiked into the Adirondacks. I felt anxious being away. Felt like I should be home making things better, working at things. And if Satan, or anyone else for that matter, offered me a deal there on the trail to make it all better, I don't know if I would have resisted. If in one fell swoop, I could have somehow pleased this angry mother; pleased the critics, if I could become successful with big programs, with a voice that carried, and plans that compelled, and charisma to effect things. If I could have performed some great act to prove myself; some great work to point to. If I could have somehow enlarged my territory, my influence, my reach. If I was offered some key to solving the spiritual and societal dilemmas all around me, if I could somehow get the job done – well, it would have been a hard offer to refuse.

These are the things that Satan tempts Jesus with. He doesn't come at Jesus with drugs and women, or a money laundering scheme. No, he tempts Jesus by complicating and compromising the very things that Jesus wanted to do. To meet needs. To influence. To gather the crowds. He tempts Jesus with the good. Satan feeds what insecurities may be there, those questions of whether one will be effective, and listened to. Satan feeds those desires to be loved. To be liked. To make people happy. To be successful. To make people feel safe. To be followed, and honored by one's community. These are things that Satan dangles before Jesus' nose, seeking to turn him aside, and to divide his allegiance to God, to undermine his sense of self, to undermine his integrity, and compromise his sense of purpose.

I remember reaching the summit on my hike. That tightness in my chest noticeable as I climbed, exhaustion growing. But as I looked out across the stunning mountains, I was caught by the scenery, the clean air, the quiet whistle of the wind, and the rugged landscape. And that nagging heaviness in my chest, I seemed to exhale it, and my lungs filled with something else, some spiritual resource beyond myself. Peace. A sense that it is ok. That I do not have to prove something, or earn my place, like running on a non-stop treadmill.

When we exhale all the toxic energy, what is it that we inhale? When Jesus says no to Satan, what is he saying yes to?

These forty days in the wilderness seemed to be aimed at Jesus' relationship with his heavenly father, his willingness to head God's voice, to trust God's love and God's timing, and to not be led astray by the crowds, or the quick fixes, or the

praise of others. For if you remember, Jesus ends up on the cross, not in the corner office.

That's what these forty days are about for Jesus. He goes out into the wilderness to be prepared, and tested for substance, and solidity. For he must be one who securely trusts their place in God's kingdom, and the work God has given him to do, whether it leads to success or betrayal, to crowds or just one person to minister to.

Going back to my 23 year old self on Mt. Marcy, perhaps what I started to learn on that hike in the wilderness was a different response to my own needs to be effective, to be liked, and to have an influence. Perhaps what started in me was finding a sense of identity not based on what I can do or effect, and one based in being present, being loved, being authentic.

I still don't know what it means to get the job done in ministry. I go do a project in my garage when I want to see a tangible result. As a parent, or a spouse, or an educator, or church leader, what does that even mean? We come to assume that certain things are supposed to happen, but often times we are frustrated and running on a never-ending treadmill. Yes, I still don't know what it means to get the job done, but I have learned about what it means to be present, and I have tried to be open and faithful. And what I have learned about these things has come from time reflecting in the wilderness, exhaling those assumptions and anxieties in an effort to see what replaces them when we breathe in.

We had a fun and lively discussion around this poem by Marie Howe the other night at Ruminations. The general consensus was that it was relatable. That despite our best intentions, despite what we assent to being the most important things in life, we are often carried along by a million little urgent details and distractions, unable to attain to some peaceful moment. They seem like innocent enough distractions, but then she asks this question, that if God is as close as my breath, "Why do I flee from you?" Her question might prompt us to ask what propels us to be so busy and distracted, so unable to sit and be present to God's voice, God's peace, God's direction. For my 23-year-old self, it was some vision of an effective leader, or some version of a job well-done. What is it for you?

These things are hard to see for ourselves when our daily habits have taken this frantic contour. And meanwhile, to the reader of the poem, or to an on-looker, it seems so clear how we avoid and run from the very things that we would say matter most.

Jesus' time in the wilderness is perhaps a prescription for how to deprogram the Pavlovian impulses we have learned, responding to every stimulus that comes along. The goal is to be present and connect to the God we love. So that we can breathe in peace and unconditional acceptance, so that we can follow God's call and not be lured by other assumptions or alluring possibilities.

It is hard to be a church leader, to be a faithful disciple, or a parent, a spouse, a teacher, a friend, a leader in society and work. Getting the job done is not always that clear, especially with the vagaries of life and human experience and change and human frailty and inconsistency. We will have to learn to get our wisdom and spiritual resources from a different place. To exhale the anxiety and to breathe in something of God. And some kind wilderness, I suspect, is the only place that can happen effectively.

So in these 40 days of lent, let us find some version of wilderness, that being a place where that we think clearer, connect with God better, to exhale, and to breathe in something of God's resources.

And all God's people said... Amen.

The Temptation of Jesus
(Mt 4:1–11; Mk 1:12–13)

⁴ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

⁴ Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’ ”

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸ Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’ ”

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

¹¹ and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

¹² Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”

¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry
(Mt 4:17; Mk 1:14–15)

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.