

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

Psalm 32

Sometimes, things just don't go right.....or at least, they don't go the way we had expected they would or the way we hoped they would. Sometimes....no matter what we do.....our dreams just won't come true. And sometimes, even when we have been very careful, our hearts get broken. Those are the times when we feel like God is no where to be found. Maybe it's a question of feeling like God has abandoned us and maybe it's a question of our turning our backs on God out of disappointment or frustration or even anger.

When we think God's not around, that's when we feel like we are in the wilderness. And we've all been there. It's a place without sufficient resources. It's a place of desolation.....a place of loneliness.....a place full of doubt. It's a place where we feel like all the responsibility falls on us. Whatever is wrong, we are supposed to fix it. It's a place where we wonder about ourselves and about God. It's a place where uncertainty seizes us. As awful and as lonely and as barren as those times are, that's the place where Jesus meets us. He's already there waiting for us. He's been there.....and done that. And there are some precious things we need to learn and understand about our time in the wilderness.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus has ended up in the wilderness immediately after his dramatic baptism. Just after his baptism, God spoke to him and told Jesus that he is God's son.....and God is very pleased with him. That's a pretty powerful endorsement.....and one that no one could forget. Right after that happens, the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. We have to wonder why. The baptism was such a 'high' in Jesus' life. He's been baptized and claimed by God as God's own. It just doesn't get any better than that! So why did the Holy Spirit send him off for such a desolate and trying time of temptation?

Some amazing things happen in the wilderness.....not just to Jesus, but to us as well. The wilderness is not only a time of trial for Jesus and for us, it is also a time of preparation. This experience happens to Jesus just after God has claimed him publicly and just before he begins his ministry. If you trace the wilderness experiences in your own life, you may be able to see a time of loneliness and desolation and trial just before some dramatic turn in your life.....just before you embarked on something very important. What lay ahead Jesus was his incredible ministry.....full of power and meaning, mountaintop experiences and desolate trials. The wilderness time was the time of preparation for that.

Part of that preparation was about Jesus coming to terms with who he is and what his mission is all about. Sometimes we forget that Jesus was not only 100% divine.....he was also 100% human. The human side may very well have needed time to struggle with his own sense of himself.....of who he actually was. It doesn't take much imagination.....when we remember that Jesus was as human as he was divine.....to realize that Jesus may very well have had some doubts about who he was and about the mission that lay ahead for him. It would be understandable for him to be asking himself the same kinds of questions that we ask ourselves.....do I have what it takes? Am I ready for this? Can I do this? Am I the person that I think I am? What will happen to me when I get tested? Will I pass the test? Do I have the strength to do what lies ahead for me?

All of the scripture lessons that we heard this morning are about the struggles that humans have with God. All of them speak to our questions about trusting God. Not only do we need to find out who WE are, but we need to figure out who God is and whether or not we can trust God. Certainly Adam and Eve decided that the serpent was more truthful with them than God was.....they decided that God was holding out on them.....that God was depriving them of something that they needed and had a right to have.....and they should take matters into their own hands and just take it. They didn't trust God to provide all they needed. They wanted it all.....they wanted the one thing they couldn't have. And therein lies the downfall for all of us.....deciding to take matters into our own hands and just take what we think we need whether it conforms with God's plan for us or not. We long to be self-sufficient. We long to want to do it ourselves. It's so much more comfortable for us to be in control.....not to have to

rely on God or trust God. We can just do it ourselves.....in our own time.....not God's time.....and in our own way.....not God's way.

That's the temptation that we are all faced with all the time. And that's the temptation that Jesus faced. Because we know about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, we can't say to ourselves in our own wilderness, "Well, Jesus just doesn't understand what this is like!!" Yes, he does!

Think for a minute the way Satan posed his temptations to Jesus. He started the first two out by saying, "If you are the Son of God....." Satan isn't just tempting Jesus with turning stones into bread to take care of his hunger or to leaping from a high ledge so that the angels can demonstrate their care for him. Satan is getting down to the basics.....Satan is tempting Jesus with satisfying Jesus' own doubt. Satan is tempting Jesus to take care of himself and prove to himself that he really is the Son of God and has the power to do these things. Satan is tempting him to demonstrate for himself that he can take care of himself without relying on God. Satan is tempting him to remove all doubt about who he is and the powers that he has. In effect, God has said to Jesus, "You are my son and I am pleased with you!!" And Satan is saying to Jesus, "Prove it!"

We want so much to be able to go into the most challenging parts of our lives with some sense of knowing.....beyond the shadow of a doubt.....that we are who we think we are.....that we are powerful enough to handle whatever comes along.....that we can provide for ourselves.....and even that we can take a shortcut to make things turn out the way we are sure they are supposed to turn out.....without giving a second thought to God.....without turning to God to provide for us.....without relying on God to fix it for us. As human beings, we desperately do NOT want to be dependent on God. We want to be able to take care of things ourselves. We often believe we have the power to do that.

And yet, in wanting to prove that we don't need God, we end up realizing how desperately we *do* need God. That force that propels us into striving for self-sufficiency.....that desire to want to prove to ourselves that we can take care of whatever needs to be taken care of.....is the very temptation that Satan not only placed before Jesus, but places before us. It's the

temptation to deny our dependence on God. It is the temptation to want to rely on ourselves rather than trust God to provide. It is the temptation to want to be in control.....and yet the more we want to control our own lives, the more out-of-control we feel.

There is no certainty except the certainty that we find in God. Our own self-reliance will fail us every time. God never does. Relying on God means that we have to live with doubt. The temptation to take matters into our own hands is what the wilderness time is all about.

Obedience to God is not about proof positive about ourselves or even about God. Obedience to God is about trusting God. It's about relinquishing control to God. And it's hard. The temptation is always there to take matters into our own hands.....but when that temptation comes, we need only to remember that Jesus meets us in our own wilderness.....and walks with us.....and empowers us by his own example.....to trust in God. Jesus places himself in the wilderness where it is desolate and where people go without and where people are downtrodden and where people suffer. He shows us that being the Son of God is about obedience, not about comfort and privilege. He walks with us and lends us his strength and shows us how to trust in God. He shows us the way.....and it's all about trust.....not proof!!

Thanks be to God!

AMEN