Facing Temptation, Living our Faith

Narrative Lectionary Epiphany 2

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Matthew 4: 1-17 Russell Mitchell-Walker

When have you found yourself in a wilderness experience, being tested or tempted? I have had many times including before we moved to Regina, and I was underemployed for 6 years, while looking for a permanent ministry in a congregation, a call. Many of you have heard some of our stories real wilderness with our sons as teenagers, who were living with addictions and other challenges. More recently was the uncertainty and stress of Brian’s neck injury and pending surgery. We all have times of testing and trials. The story of Jesus’ Temptation today can give us some guidance in dealing with them.

After the transformative moment of Jesus’ baptism, affirming that he is beloved of God, he was lead out into the desert, the wilderness to fast and pray and discern what God wanted him to do and be. To discern what his ministry would be. He fasted for 40 days and near the end of it when he was weak and hungry he must have felt like he was in the wilderness like his ancestors before him who followed Moses into the desert. Throughout scriptures, the wilderness can represent a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God’s next move, a place of learning to trust in God. For example:

* After 40 days and nights on the ark with Noah and his family, God made a new covenant never to destroy the earth again
* 40 days in the wilderness with Moses led to the new covenant of the 10 commandments
* 40 days Elijah fasted before receiving a new commission from God.

According to [Tom Harper](http://www.tomharpur.com/books/waterintowine/), in Water into Wine, the wilderness is a metaphor for the souls’ life in the body on this plane of existence. We are spiritual beings in the wilderness of bodily existence. He also identifies that it is often after moments of great spiritual insight or awakening when we can find ourselves struck with doubt, testings or temptations. The story of Jesus tempted in the wilderness follows his baptism, and the experience of knowing he is beloved of God. If you think about the time when you have doubted or been tested, was there any experience of insight or awakening that happened previous to it?

The temptations, according to Harper, are intended to speak to us allegorically rather than be specifically about Jesus and his ministry. They are reflective of our souls being challenged and addressed in our lives. When we look at each temptation individually we can see how they might have meaning for us as well, and how so called ‘conventional wisdom’ or ‘common sense’ touted by our culture and society use these arguments of Satan to address or not address todays realities of injustice.

The first temptation was Satan telling Jesus, who is famished, to turn the stones into bread. Rather than seeing it as a literal challenge to feed himself, Jesus says, through scripture, we can not live on bread alone. The wider meaning for us can connect with materialism, we need more than bread and things to have meaning in life. In facing the injustice of hunger, our systems too often focus on providing food (bread) using the approach of charity, rather than addressing the roots of the problem of hunger and poverty. This week we [learned](https://globalnews.ca/news/4857582/canada-food-waste-study-2019/) that the system is so broken that more than half of the food produced gets thrown away because it hasn’t been sold or used for food. The message of the scripture is that it is about much more than bread. Harper says we are “incessantly bombarded by the siren call of money, celebrity, the paraphernalia of success, and an ever-increasing, soul-destroying consumerism that all but drowns out the ‘still small voice’ that brings the creative, challenging word, the inner prompting, the life-sustaining essence flowing from ‘the mouth of God’”

The second temptation, in Matthew – Luke reverses the order here – is putting God to the test. Satan tells Jesus “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up so you will not dash your foot against a stone’”. Satan begins the challenge with *If you are the Son of God*. The fundamental issue here, Harper says, is about doubting the truth of one’s own confirmed experience of the inner Christ. This can happen throughout our lives, throughout our day. One moment we know we are God’s beloved child, the next we doubt or are tempted to question it. Putting God to the test can also connect with how we view God as supernatural and pray for help in times of crisis in a bargaining way. The response to the temptation is telling us that this is who God is or is meant to be for us. We are beloved of God, children of light, that we are beloved beyond all telling and that all we have or are or ever hope to be is in God’s care. God is with us in whatever we are going through and there is no reason to doubt that. The temptation here in relation to injustice is that we just need to pray to God for a miracle or for God to look after it and God will, removing our responsibility to act or change.

The final temptation is the lust for power and authority. Satan tells Jesus he will give him authority over all the kingdoms of the world if he worships him. Lust for power is the aspect of the shadow side of humanity that has caused the most havoc over the eons. We all can be tempted to have power and/or control in our lives. We see it both politically and personally. It contributes to the so called trickle down theory of economics, which tells us that as others get wealthy and are given tax breaks and benefits the rest of society will benefit as well.

In the story, Jesus was tempted by Satan. How might and do we understand Satan? Some believe this was a physical experience with a bodily devil talking with Jesus. Some believe it was an inner turmoil or discernment. In Job, Satan acts as a secret agent of God who tests the loyalty of Job through a series of tragic calamities. Indeed, the name "Satan," comes from the Persian for just such a person - a secret agent of the King who secretly tests subjects' loyalty to the King. The authors of the commentary *Preaching Peace* describe another perspective:

Just as God has created his heavenly messengers, what we call angels, so we humans, partners with God in the creating process, have created negative energies and powers, what Scripture calls the demonic. The demonic is our creation, “demons” are our monsters, our darkness, our orcs. Thus it is all the more important that it is Jesus the human who overcomes them, for he too had the possibility of being influenced by these powers of darkness that we created and continue to create.

Satan then is the negative energies or powers that can influence us to go against God, or goodness, or love. Regardless of how we understand Satan, the message in the story is that Jesus, as a human overcame the temptations, knowing that they were not of God or the direction God wanted Jesus to go.

I think many of us believe that the times of temptations and wilderness experiences are not sent to us by God, and we look to God during these times for support and guidance. We can often experience this through the support and guidance of those around us – God working through the people in our lives. I know the challenges I faced before and during Brians’ surgery I was not alone. Before his accident, I had been taking the Leadership in the New Parish course and was gaining insights into the importance of being rooted in place, knowing and connecting with the neighbourhood and being open to where God is already at work. It was powerful insight for me regarding the church and believed that this is the way forward for the church in general. With regard to Brian’s injury I had to face some of my own doubts and insecurities of this time, such as if things went wrong and he was paralyzed, whether I would have enough or be good enough to take care of him. These are the doubts that we can face when times get tough. What helped me was talking about it and knowing that I would not have to face any of it alone. There was a community of support available to me. The anxiety and avoidance of facing it, prevented me from making the connection with the learnings about being rooted in place and drawing on the connections that those roots produce. I would have enough and be good enough with the community I and we are connected to. How have your experiences of doubt and temptation connected with learnings and insights you had previous to those times?

Looking back at the story with Jesus, he challenges the temptations and overcomes them not just by quoting scripture but by being in tune with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love and compassion. Tom Harper identifies I Corinthians 13, the famous passage of love – “love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious, or boastful or arrogant or rude…”, as not just a hymn to love, it’s an explicit detailed picture of what God intends us to become. It gives us the steps to how to become the ‘beings of light’ God wants us to be. It provides us with a grounding for making it through the wilderness, the times of testing. When we can make our choices and face our temptations with that same grounding of love and Spirit and the example of Jesus’ life and love, there is hope. May you be able to draw on that Spirit of love and support as you experience challenges, doubts, temptations in your life, work and experience of the church. May you seek to make the connection with what insights or awakening you had before these times and draw on that wisdom to help you. May we know that we are beloved of God, in all that we do.