

Sermon: Your Wilderness Experience
Text: Mark 1:9-15
Date: March 1, 2009 – First Sunday of Lent
Place: Jesup First UMC

The sheriff was looking for a new deputy and so he called in one of the applicants for an interview. And he asked the young man: “*Okay, what is 1 and 1?*” And the man said: “*Eleven.*” Well, the sheriff thought to himself, “*That’s not exactly what I meant but he does have a point.*”

So, he asked another question: “*What two days of the week start with the letter ‘T’?*” And the man said: “*Today and tomorrow.*” Well, that surprised the sheriff too; in fact, he had never thought of it that way before.

So, he said: “*Now, listen very carefully. Who killed Abraham Lincoln?*” And the young man looked a little surprised. He thought about it a minute and finally admitted: “*I don’t know.*” So the sheriff said: “*Why don’t you go home and work on it a few days?*” So, the young man went home to his waiting family and he walked in and said: “*Good news! The interview went great! I got the job. And it’s the first day on the job and I’m already working on a murder case.*”

Brothers and sisters, sometimes, important things happen really fast in our lives. One day, we’re on a mountaintop, walking with God more closely than ever before, everything is going great at home, at work, in the community and then, something happens and everything in our world is turned upside down.

Jesus had just had a mountaintop experience. He went down to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist and as He was coming up from the water, He saw the Holy Spirit descending from

heaven in the form of a dove and resting on Him and He heard a voice from heaven say, "*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.*" And then, the Bible says the Holy Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness. Now, here Jesus is fasting and praying in the wilderness, communing with His Heavenly Father and preparing Himself for His ministry. And just when Jesus was on the mountaintop, He is confronted with the very powers of hell itself. Satan comes and tempts Jesus to turn stones to bread, to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, and to bow down and worship Satan himself.

Now, it's Jesus' first day on the job and already it's crunch time! How He responds to these temptations will ultimately determine His relationship with His Father, the effectiveness of His ministry, and the validity of His sacrifice on Calvary's cross.

You know, temptation is part of our daily lives. The Bible says: "*Let no man say WHEN he is tempted*" not "*IF he is tempted.*" Everybody is tempted and being tempted is not a sin. How we respond to temptation is. Romans 3:20 says: "*For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" Now, this may seem too simplistic to some, but friends, if we really think about it, every single act of sin that we commit begins with temptation. And since the Bible says that "*Jesus was tempted in every way even as we are and yet, without sin,*" it seems to me that you and I could learn a lesson from Jesus' example, that perhaps we could learn to resist temptation and to overcome the tempter.

So, let's take a closer look at these temptations:

I. THERE IS THE TEMPTATION TO USE GOD'S POWER FOR SELFISH PURPOSES.

After Jesus had been fasting, just when His body was craving food, Satan came to Him and said: "*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.*" This is a temptation to use God's power to satisfy personal needs.

Now, this is a temptation we fall face. You see, God is the source of every good and perfect gift; God showers us with blessing upon blessing; God has provided us with gifts and abilities so that we can earn incomes and provide for our families and so that we might be a blessing to those around us by tithing and giving generously to His church. But then, crunch time comes and we are tempted to take what God intended for something else and use it to build bigger barns, bigger homes, nicer cars, fancier clothes. We're tempted to take our God-given gifts and abilities and use them to satisfy our own need for power and position instead of using them to serve within the Church and within the community.

But Satan is wrong ... for although we have used God's resources to surround ourselves with things we don't even **NEED**, our greatest needs are not physical or material; they are spiritual. That's what Jesus meant when He said: "*Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*"

Now, this is a big temptation; we face it every day. We are tempted to use God's blessings selfishly instead of using them in ways that place ourselves and others in a place of spiritual submission to God.

But here's the twist: Jesus said if you and I would use our gifts and abilities to make God the priority, everything else would fall into its natural place. Listen: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you."

We all face the temptation to use God's resources for selfish reasons.

II. THERE IS THE TEMPTATION TO USE YOUR METHODS TO ACCOMPLISH GOD'S PLAN.

Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and said: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written ..." Now, from the very beginning there was a plan for Jesus' life. He would come down from heaven and reconcile the world to God by dying on the cross. But Satan says: "*You know, Jesus, we can do this thing a different way. Just jump down from here and everybody will see what happens and they'll gather around you in droves.*" But Jesus refused to jump. In fact, He said: "It is also written: You will not tempt the Lord your God."

You know, God has a plan for our lives. Now, I'm not a Calvinist; Methodists do not believe in predestination. But the Bible says: "I know the plans I have for you says the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, plans to prosper you and give you a future filled with hope." And I believe God has a method for us to use in fulfilling His planned purpose for our lives; it's the way of the cross. Jesus said: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." The old hymn writer said: "*Must Jesus bear*

the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone and there's a cross for me."

But there's something about human nature that wants to accomplish God's purposes our way. That's what happened with Abraham and Sarah. God promised them a son and when Sarah wasn't able to have a son, she came up with a better plan and gave her servant, Hagar, to Abraham instead. And the world has been paying for it ever since.

You cannot accomplish God's plans your way. The way to greatness is still through service. And the way of discipleship is still the way of the cross. We all face the temptation of finding an easier way of accomplishing God's plan.

III. THERE IS THE TEMPTATION TO GIVE GOD'S PRAISE TO SOMEONE OR SOMETHING ELSE.

Satan showed Jesus all the Kingdoms of the world and said: "*All of this can be yours if you'll only bow down and worship me.*" From the very beginning, God had told the people of Israel, "*I am the Lord your God ... you will not worship any other gods ... you will not make for yourself any idol ... you must never bow before them ... for I am very jealous.*" And yet, Israel was an idolatrous people.

Now, every single day, we face this temptation. There's something about us that drives us to worship and if we don't worship God, we'll worship something else. Now, I don't see people bowing to statues, but we all sit in front of the television. We don't carve images of birds and animals, but we carve out for ourselves a lifestyle that totally excludes God except

for one hour on Sunday morning. We make a god out of our jobs, our families, and our possessions because human nature drives us to worship something that we can see and touch.

But Jesus didn't bow; He said, "**Be gone, Satan, for it is written ... 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him alone shall you serve.'**"

And then, the temptation was over. Oh, Satan would come again. He came again through the voice of Peter who said: "*Oh now Jesus, you don't have to go to Jerusalem and die.*" He came again in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was praying in earnest. He came again on the cross through the voice of the Centurion who said: "**If you are the Son of God, then save yourself.**" In fact, I believe Satan tempted Jesus every day just like he tempts us and yet, the Bible says Jesus never sinned.

How? How did Jesus overcome temptation?

First, He remained in constant fellowship with God! Many times, we just aren't prepared when temptation comes. We have no solid foundation upon which to build a resistance. But Jesus, even at His weakest hour was ready. He had spent time in prayer; He had attended the synagogue; He had worshiped at the Temple! He had done the things that kept His relationship with God strong and growing.

Second, He relied on the strength of God's Word! Many times, we try to rely on our own strength and our own wisdom when temptation comes. We think we know best, but look at what Jesus did. He said, "**It**

is written ... it is written ... it is written.” He used the Truth of God’s Word against Satan’s lies.

Third, He confronted the enemy instead of running. There’s something about us that believes that if we just ignore something long enough it will go away. But that’s not what Jesus did. He confronted the enemy. When the temptation came, Jesus rose up to meet it. And He finally told Satan, “*Get out of here.*” You see, the Bible doesn’t tell us to run; it tells us to resist: “*Resist the devil and he will flee from you.*”

Listen friends, everyone is tempted. This week, you’re going to be tempted. The question is: will you be ready?

LET’S PREPARE OUR HEARTS TO RECEIVE THE HOLY SACRAMENT!