

Sermon, October 3, 2021

Matthew 4:1-11

“Vision Quest”

Jesus had just been baptized at the Jordan River by John the Baptist, and the Spirit who had alighted on him in the form of a dove now leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. This story has a number of parallels, which can lead us to read it allegorically. For example, there are similar stories to be found in early rabbinic writings. (Hare) Also, in classical western literature, such as you might find in the mythological tales of Ancient Greece and Rome, or the medieval quests of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table! Someone pure of heart sets out to find something that has alluded others but must face various tests and temptations along the way. Bishop Steven Charleston, whom I have mentioned in recent sermons, also draws parallels between this story and the traditions of Native American vision quests. But the strongest parallel is to be found in the Bible itself. Matthew, being the most Jewish of the gospel writers, was fond of drawing parallels between Jesus' story and that of Moses. In this case, Jesus' forty days and nights in the wilderness mirrors the Israelites forty years in the desert. In fact, each of Jesus' responses to the temptations set before him are found in the Book of Deuteronomy- the culmination of the Hebrews journey to the Promised Land.

Read at face value, following his baptism, a voice from heaven declares of Jesus, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”. Yet, Jesus being led into the wilderness to be tested is intended to show his worthiness to be called Son of God. Notice that in the first two temptations the devil begins by saying, “If you are the Son of God...”. But if we read it allegorically, we may come to see that this story is as much about ourselves as it is about Jesus - that the temptations set before him can also face us - and, perhaps, tests whether or not we can legitimately refer to ourselves as sons and daughters of the Most High.

Such a reading also calls for us to question the identity of Jesus' opponent in the story. He is identified as the devil, but as Charleston suggests, “...Jesus understands how his own mind is putting him to the test”. Likewise, as we find ourselves in our own places of wilderness, the one whom we are truly wrestling with is not some horned, pitchfork carrying figure, but our own inner voice, our own struggling Self. The devil becomes not an actual demonic figure, but a personification of the darker side of our nature. If Christians really desire growth and a deepening of their spiritual existence, then they have to let go of the “the devil made me do it” mentality. A major step towards spiritual maturity is taking responsibility for one's own thoughts and actions.

In the first temptation we are told that Jesus is famished, and the devil says, “If you are the Son of God command these stones to become loaves of bread”. This mirrors the Israelites complaint before Moses that they have no bread.” We may not relate to this right away. We are pretty well fed. But it can also refer to other unfulfilled desires we may have. This may or may not be internally destructive depending on the desire - and we should keep in mind the Buddhist principle that desire resides as a root cause of suffering. It also behooves us to recognize the distinct difference that can exist between what we desire and what we truly need. Jesus draws from Deuteronomy and says, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Notice that he does not deny the importance of bread (meaning food) as important for physical existence, but life at its fullest requires spiritual food as well. The

mouth of God can be made manifest in numerous ways beginning with scripture, but it can also make itself heard in the form of one's conscience.

In the second temptation the devil takes Jesus to a high place and tells him that if he is the Son of God and throws himself down God will certainly send angels to save him. Jesus replies, "It is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Remember our reading from two weeks ago when "the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord with us or not?" That is the question we may sometimes ask ourselves when things don't seem to be going our way, and we may find ourselves demanding some sort of sign to assure us of His presence and His care. But what is the problem with such a request? It is the denial of faith! Especially is we understand faith as trust. To demand a sign is tantamount to saying to God "I do not trust you!"

The third time the devil, again, takes Jesus to a high place and shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and says that all of that will be his if he will simply fall down and worship him. Jesus replies, "Away with you Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." At first glance it would appear that the temptation is for great wealth and power, and it certainly is part of it, but the real issue is idolatry, reminiscent of the Israelites dancing around the golden calf. The devil is tempting Jesus to place his trust in him. We can do the same if and when we place our trust in such things as wealth and power rather than God, or also following the example of Adam and Eve of placing themselves apart or above the will of God. It is possible to make idols of ourselves. At its most extreme we look into a mirror and see a golden calf reflected back!

Our spiritual journeys are long - in fact, the duration of a lifetime, and along the way there are times when we can find ourselves in the wilderness; and, in there, encounter obstacles and temptations designed to push us off track. At such times we have to find within ourselves the ability place our trust in the Lord our God! Amen.

Let us pray: Eternal Spirit of the universe, we thank you that you do not leave us alone but place your word within us in the midst of our life together. You are no statue of silver or gold, but a living reality on the face of the earth. Give us courage and commitment to let your winds blow through us and let your life be revealed among us. Empowered by your Spirit, may we care for the needs of all people, break bread together with joy, and praise you day by day. Grant us your peace; through Jesus who lives among us. Amen.