

THE STORY OF JESUS
CHAPTER III: "Jesus and the Wilderness"

INTRODUCTION

The sermons on the Sunday mornings in Lent this year are attempting to tell the Story of Jesus, and thus far we have followed that story from his birth through his baptism pausing here and there along the way in order to relate certain aspects of his life to our own lives. Those of you who were here last Sunday will recall that when Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan River in which he had been baptized by John that the heavens literally opened for him - that there was a wonderful moment of vision, a moment of exaltation and exhilaration. He became extremely aware of the fact that God had chosen him for a unique mission in life. This is what we thought about last Sunday.

Today we come to the more somber story which deals with his struggle with temptation in the wilderness. It followed almost immediately his baptismal experience. I think we know from our own experiences in life that periods of ecstasy and exhilaration are likely to be followed by periods of depression. Life seems to have a way of shifting from one extreme to another - from elevation to depression, from the heights to the depths, one day the voice of God and the next day the voice of the devil, from unmistakable certainty to uncertainty and doubt. And so we are, in a way, prepared for what happened to Jesus after he had seen the heavens open and we are not surprised to learn that he was driven into the wilderness; the wilderness, think of it - unpopulated, uncultivated, unfamiliar, unproductive wasteland. It's the very picture of depression and it suggests to us those low moments in life when you and I pause and wonder what life is all about. One does not have to go to Arizona or Arabia to be in the wilderness. One can be in the wilderness standing in the middle of Times Square in this city, or in the middle of Piccadilly Circus in London. The Gospel account reads quite simply: "And Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness, being forty days tempted by the devil".

WHY DID HE GO?

I suppose the first question that one might ask, if he were hearing this story for the first time, would be this: why did Jesus go into the wilderness. What was it that "drove" him into the wilderness, away from his friends, away from all life in general? Was it that he was trying to escape from some one or some thing? Of course, we have no way of knowing for sure just what it was, but I think we can come up with a fairly accurate answer from reading between the lines of the Gospel account. I think that Jesus went into the wilderness in order to think things through. He went into the wilderness in order to thrash out in his own mind the kind of person he was going to be in order to accomplish this great task to which he had unmistakably felt himself called. He was now so aware of the fact that Destiny, if you will, had laid its hand upon him lifting him up out of the crowd for a particular mission. At the time of his baptism this realization that he was a chosen person came to its climax. But the thought that kept coming back into his mind, as it would probably come into our minds, was this: what kind of a person should I be in order to accomplish this task. My task, as I see it, is to save my people. But how? And from what? This vision now had to be thought through very carefully; soul searching was demanded. He went into the wilderness to think things through, and to bring all of the experience of his early years into focus upon this mighty task in order to decide as to what kind of a saviour he was going to be!

WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?

This brings us to the second question that I would consider with you, a question that presents itself quite logically at this point. What actually happened to him in the wilderness. I read the Gospel account of what took place in the wilderness to you for our scripture lesson this morning. It tells us that Jesus was tempted three times by the Devil. You may wonder as to whether Jesus actually saw the Devil? You may ask as to whether this was a struggle between two men on a mountain top. I don't think so. If we had been there, in the same place, at the same moment, we might not have seen anything out of the ordinary, or heard anything unusual. And so once again I am tempted to interpret this experience as an inner, emotional, subjective experience that went on in the heart and mind and spirit of a man.

It was while he was in the wilderness that he came to the great realization that he was torn between two possibilities. On the one hand he could be the type of person that the people expected him to be, or on the other hand he could be the type of person that God wanted him to be. He was torn between these two possibilities. He knew well what the people expected him to be. They were looking for a Messiah - a kind of public benefactor, a person who would feed all of the hungry people of Palestine, a person who would change the stones into bread. This, of course, is what was suggested by the first temptation. The temptation to become an economic saviour. They were looking for a political Messiah, someone who would gather the collective power of their own people together and thus drive the Romans out of the country and in general raise the standard of living thus making life easier and more comfortable for them. This is suggested by the second temptation, the temptation to become the political saviour of his people. They were looking for a popular hero, a person who would do the dramatic, the miraculous, the supernatural, yes, if needs be jump from the top of the temple in Jerusalem without being hurt. This was suggested by the third temptation. All three temptations had to do with three possible methods by which Jesus might have been able to win the attention, the support and the loyalty of men. He knew his people well and he knew what they expected him to be, and mind you these temptations were real because some of them were good.

But on the other hand, he knew what God wanted him to be. Down through the years of his life he had developed a very close relationship with God, so close in fact that he was able to call him "Father". Deep down in his heart, he knew that God did not want him to cater to people, but to care for them in much the same fashion that a parent cares for a wayward child. Deep down in his heart of hearts, he knew that God wanted him to be a man of faith and not a man of force, a man who would win people to his way because of what he was, not because of what he did. These two possibilities were waging a war on the battlefield of his own soul. He was tempted to be the type of saviour that men wanted him to be: an economic saviour, a political saviour. How easy it would be to buy their hearts by feeding their bodies; how easy it would be to win their affections by assuming the role of the benevolent dictator; how easy to capture their imaginations by resorting to the spectacular. And when he came out of the wilderness he was sure of at least two things: first - that he would rather be right with God, and perhaps fail in his mission to save the people, than to be wrong with God and succeed in his life's purpose. And second - he realized too that if he ever hoped to set his people free from all of the things that had enslaved them, he would have to be willing to suffer failure, humiliation, defeat and perhaps even death. He overcame the temptations and rejected all three methods for the infinitely harder road through Calvary and so we call him Lord!

RELATING THIS TO OUR LIVES

And now, as I have done thus far in this sermon series, I should like to attempt to relate this to our own lives, and in so doing suggest to you two comments, two observations growing out of this wilderness experience in the life of Jesus.

The first observation would be this. I think that all three of these temptations that Jesus faced and rejected were temptations to do something good, but something not quite good enough. The first temptation, for instance, was the temptation to change the stones into bread, the temptation to feed people. Nothing wrong with this. The second temptation was the temptation to become a political saviour and rule the people in the role of a benevolent dictator. This too can be a good thing. The third temptation was to give the people a sign, to do something dramatic and spectacular and this need not be a bad thing. They were temptations not to do something sinful or wrong; they were temptations to do something good, but something not quite good enough. And as I observe life around me and as I try to come to a better understanding of myself, it seems to me that we today are often confronted with something of this same temptation, the temptation to be good, but not quite good enough. Most of us are not tempted to do something extremely wrong or sinful - to go out and rob a bank or to commit some crime that might make tomorrow evening's headline (at least I'd like to think that we are not). Our temptation is simply to be satisfied with that which may in itself be good, but which in itself is not the very best. This is true not only in our own personal lives, but also in the broader areas of life which constantly surrounds us. We're tempted to accept mediocrity time and time again. This is the question that Jesus faced and a question that we need to face: Shall we do those things that are all right in themselves, but which are not the best we know, or shall we pursue those lines that we know to be the way of God even though they do not meet with popularity and worldly success.

Let me become more specific. Take for instance a young man starting out in business. (And this need not be just a young man). Above everything else he wants to be a success in his chosen field. As time goes on, the future begins to open up for him, and in his hurry to achieve his place in the sun and his home in the suburbs, he becomes a little careless. Perhaps he bruises those who stand in his way; perhaps he begins to cut a few corners, compromising his ideals, catering to others along the way, nevering doing anything extremely bad or wrong. But rather submitting to the temptation not to be his very best self and to live by the best and highest possible standard that he knows. The could apply, I suppose, not only to young men, but also to young women.

Or take a young couple who more than anything else in the world want to have a family. Nothing wrong with this. But perhaps before they start to have this family, they should ask themselves some serious questions: will we be tempted, as so many parents are today, to be part-time parents. Will we be tempted to exercise parenthood as something of an extracurricular activity. Will we be tempted to become possessive parents.

Or take this matter of being a Christian. This is something that will include all of us, not just the young men or young couples. What kind of a Christian are you tempted to be? A part-time Christian? A Christian in name only? One who wants the church around, but who seldom if ever bothers to come around to the church. This reminds me

of a story that I heard recently about a minister down in Kentucky who was given to making rather unusual announcements from the pulpit on a Sunday morning. He was about to move on to another church, perhaps because he was given to making these rather unusual announcements. One Sunday morning it seems that he said to his congregation "The funeral service for Mr. John Brown will be heard tomorrow afternoon at three o'clock here in the church" (Nothing wrong with that) But then he went on to say this "And Brother Brown will be here himself, in person, for the first time in three years, and I'm sure that all of you will want to be here to bid him farewell". Well there are those who want the church around but who never bother to come around to the church. Are you tempted to be that kind of Christian? Are you tempted to be the kind of Christian who puts loyalty to Christ far below your loyalty to other things. This is the first comment: so often we are tempted to be satisfied with things which in themselves may be good, but which are not the best that we know.

The second observation is only implied in this story, at least as I read it and understand it, and it is to be found in the phrase that introduces two of the three temptations. "If thou be the Son of God".....turn these stones into bread. "If thou be the Son of God..." cast thyself down. Oh how sure he had been that he was. Intimations and suggestions in his earlier years. And then the moment of certainty and exaltation and exhilaration at the time of his baptism. But was he? He had been so sure that his life was in some unique relationship to God. But was it? There apparently came to him that terrible and haunting thought of doubt. "Can I be sure? "Maybe I'm not" "Perhaps this is just an illusion of grandeur" "Maybe I was mistaken". As I observe life around me and as I try to come to a better understanding of myself, one of the greatest temptations with which all of us have to struggle is the temptation to doubt ourselves, to doubt those convictions and moments of certainty that have come to us on previous occasions. There are those high moments of life when we are so very sure of ourselves, our abilities, and what we want to do in life, but then there come those other moments, dark moments, when difficulties begin to creep in and our whole outlook begins to change and we start to ask ourselves: "Can I be sure" "Am I the one" "Am I just fooling myself by clinging to this dream or vision that started me moving in the direction in which I've been moving. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe all of those things that I've thought all along are really not true" And so we begin to doubt ourselves and wonder whether we'll ever make it and with this element of doubt there comes that old enemy fear which paralyzes a person's life. Remember that Jesus faced this temptation and somehow he managed to overcome it, and I should like to think that we can do the same. I'd like to think that you and I have been given the same spiritual equipment which is necessary to overcome not only this temptation but all of the lesser temptations of life.

CLOSING SECTION

And so as we come to the end of this the third chapter in the story of Jesus, I would remind you that this familiar story of Jesus in the wilderness is one of the great and definitive themes of Lent. For in this account we have a description of his soul's inner struggle, a description of how he rejected easy alternative and chose the harder pathway that eventually led to greater life. And I sincerely hope that those of you who are sharing in these services of Lent in this church are making a real effort to follow him into the wilderness - thrashing out in your

minds and in your own souls some of the great questions involved in your own life and in the life of our own time. And that like Jesus you too will come out of the wilderness choosing to trust God's love and then meeting the world as consistently as possible on those terms, doing the best with the various situations that come along. It was in the wilderness that Jesus fought the decisive battle of his life and won that battle. For him it meant that he would rather be right with God and perhaps suffer defeat, humiliation and fail in his mission by all of the standards of the world, than to succeed in his mission and be wrong with God. And once that decision had been made, what a relief there must have been, a relief of which Mark alone of the Gospel writers gives us any indication when he wrote in one unforgettable sentence: "And he was with the wild beasts, and angels came and ministered unto him!"

LET US PRAY: Guide us, Our Father, as we attempt to follow this Man from Galilee through all of the various twisted and complex ways of our society. Save us from the temptation of being satisfied with anything, but the very best. Save us from the temptation of doubting ourselves and those glorious moments of certainty that we have had in previous moments of life. May this Season of Lent be for us a time of soul searching and a time of decision making. We ask this in the spirit of him who is our spiritual saviour, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen