

Freedom in the Desert
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Last Tuesday, I was talking with the confirmation class about seasons, especially as they relate to annual religious observances. I think that there is something hardwired into humans...as perhaps into other creatures – that makes us very sensitive to seasonal change: to light and dark, to temperature and humidity. And so we employ those sensitivities when we worship, when we commune with a higher power. Ancient peoples watched the sun, moon and stars very carefully to discern the seasons and plotted their habits accordingly. This can get a little confusing to us today, since some sacred observances use a solar calendar, some use a lunar calendar, and some use a combination of the two. So in Islam, Ramadan, the holy time of fasting, repentance, and almsgiving, shifts with the lunar calendar, eleven days earlier each year, and lasts 30 days. It can take place in any season. And there is a story behind it: it commemorates the gift of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad. The Jewish time of fasting and repentance, Yom Kippur, uses both the lunar and solar calendars to arrive at a time that varies in date, but is always at the very end of the summer or beginning of fall. It lasts 10 days, but some devout worshippers add the month of Elul to it so that it becomes 40 days. And there is a story behind it: it commemorates the time that Moses came down from the mountain with commandments and discovered the people worshipping an idol – a time when they really needed forgiveness. We Christians base the penitential Lenten season on the date of Easter, which also changes according to both solar and lunar time. So we always start Lent sometime in winter and end sometime in Spring. And there is – surprise – a story behind it: it commemorates the 40 soul-searching days Jesus spent in the wilderness. Common threads: a common human need for a self-audit, a re-evaluation, a digging deeper into our relationships with God and neighbor.

It is worth remembering what we share with other faiths. It is worth remembering that the writer of the Gospel was Jewish, and thinking back to his long tradition. Forty days and nights that Noah and his family endured the deluge on board the ark, after which God made a covenant never again to destroy the earth with a flood; forty days and nights that Moses fasted on Mount Sinai as he waited for God's new covenant with the Israelites; forty days and nights that Elijah fasted in the desert struggling to understand his mission as a prophet; forty years that the Israelites wandered the wilderness in preparation for their arrival in the Promised Land, struggling to find their identity as a chosen people.

These physical, geographical journeys and wanderings represented a spiritual maturing in each story: a deepening relationship with the divine, an added dimension of self-understanding. The number forty is obviously symbolic. Some people think that it is used because a woman carries a child for 40 weeks in the womb before it is born. So these experiences are “gestational,” leading to new birth and new life. This renewal is not instant: it takes 40 days or 40 weeks or 40 years. In other words, a long time. A long time in dangerous desert places.

Throughout our Bible, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God's next move, a place of learning to trust in God's love and grace. Expansive, open, an

experience of freedom. It is a place of solitude, but it is about an unfolding relationship. In our green and leafy environment, (or our gray and snowy environment) we have to use our imaginations to get to the desert, that edgy place of clear light, long vistas, and piercing silence.

Jesus has just been baptized in a river. It was a profound moment. He felt infused by God's Spirit. He understood himself to be a child of God. Divine love, divine favor poured over him in waves. But that profound moment was brief. The same Spirit that came down on him led him away to the wilderness for a time of testing. That same Spirit seemed not just gracious and approving but purposeful: there was a process to follow. Matthew's Gospel says that Jesus was led by the Spirit. Mark's Gospel says that he was driven or ejected by the Spirit. Either way, he had to go there, away from those crowds by the river, away from the voice of blessing, into the silence and perfect freedom of the desert.

Freedom, solitude and hunger: that's what the Spirit seems to require for this next step in growth. Because the Spirit is purposeful and she has a tool for her purpose. This tool is named several ways by Matthew: Devil, Tempter, Satan. All of the art I see that pictures this passage shows a humanoid figure speaking with Jesus. In some paintings, it is almost a caricature: red skin, horns, tail. A demon. But the roots of the word "satan" really lead us in another direction. Satan refers to one who tests a person. In the Hebrew Bible, Satan is more like a prosecuting attorney, pressuring the defendant to get at the truth. Maybe those paintings should show a reasonable, respectable, well-dressed, well-educated human, not an alien figure at all.

I think of these three names – devil, tempter, Satan - as a means of externalizing what is happening to Jesus. It makes a dramatic story, something we can picture. An interior dialogue is interesting, but the listener wants something more cinematic. And Matthew gives it to us. It comes as a dialogue about interpreting Scripture, applying Scripture to real life.

The Tempter, the Tester is trying to trap Jesus with possibilities. He is always saying "If" – he is always making conditions. "If you are the Son of God," "If you fall down and worship me." He seems to be offering an endless expanse of satisfaction and comfort and power. If. And he is willing to quote Scripture at Jesus: he quotes the Psalms in verse 6. He seems to speak Jesus' language. More reason for thinking of this as an interior dialogue.

All of Jesus' replies are quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, the ancient law of Israel. But Jesus never just 'quoted' the Scriptures; he always 'interpreted' them in the power and presence of God's Spirit. In the desert, Jesus experienced Word and Spirit working together; one without the other is not enough. Word alone, Bible quoting alone, can be done by the devil too.

The Rev. Peter J. Gomes, author of The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart, gave us words of caution and challenge about the book we often look to for rules and comfort and certainty. He writes: "The Bible alone is the most dangerous thing I can think of. You need an ongoing context and a community of interpretation to keep the Bible current and to keep yourself honest. Forget the thought that the Bible is an absolute pronouncement."

In the quiet of the desert, in the extremity of fasting, Jesus contemplated his Bible, his tradition. He contemplated all the possibilities, all the "Ifs." The "If you are the Son of God" contemplations were his moments of doubt and self-questioning. If...then what? If...then you are free to do so many things. What will you do with this freedom?

So often we think of temptation in fairly trivial terms: we are tempted to misuse life's pleasures. But Matthew presents temptation not as a private morality game but as a conceptual struggle about the shape and nature of ministry. Infused by God's Spirit, eyes open to the great expanse before him, Jesus has his life on the line, the shape of his life, the meaning of his life. Though we often try to follow Jesus into the desert by denying ourselves chocolate or some other treat, let's not fool ourselves. This is an identity test, not a willpower test.

"The devil made me do it." "I'm only human." "I couldn't help myself." These phrases suggest that when temptation and testing come along we are merely victims. Jesus demonstrates another approach: our freedom to respond in power. As Fred Craddock, a professor of preaching, wrote, "Temptation indicates strength, not weakness. One is tempted only to do that which lies within one's abilities. The greater one's capacities, the greater one's temptations. The fierceness of Jesus' desert struggle is testimony to his power." Power... and freedom.

Even though our Gospel story today is presented as a classic tale of a hero on a vision quest, we should remember that we have **all** been claimed as sons and daughters of God. What Jesus does, responding with Word, interpreted by Spirit, is something we can all do, something our congregation can do. Jesus is not a mythic hero, but our teacher and our model. He was tested, and willingly accepted this as part of his spiritual journey. In Lent, and at other times, we are tested, pushed to the limits of our understanding. We seek the wholeness and integrity that Jesus attained in his verbal wrestling. In his freedom, he contemplated physical comfort, dramatic displays of magic, and political power. In his freedom, he chose another path.

Not an easy path: the testing was not over. The word used here describing it as a test occurs elsewhere in Matthew. Members of the local leadership test Jesus, asking difficult questions in order to undermine his authority or to discredit him. In each case Jesus responds by quoting scripture. The interior dialogue about the meaning of tradition becomes an exterior dialogue with the community. Jesus' temptations did not end in the desert. Again and again he was tested. "Don't go to Judea, they want to stone you," said the disciples. "Avoid the cross," said Simon Peter. And in Gethsemane, Jesus himself prays, "Remove this cup from me." In church communities, when we follow Jesus, it is the same; the testing goes on.

In some ways the testing was about timing, about letting ministry unfold in a more fruitful way. Jesus does not choose the quick fix, or choose to avoid suffering. In fact, later Jesus would seem to create a feast out of almost nothing, but it was to feed 5000 people, not just to quickly satisfy his own hunger. In fact, Jesus was "borne up on the hands of angels" as the beloved of God, but not until he had gone through suffering and death. In fact, Jesus' name is heard in all the kingdoms of the world, but through influence, not ownership. The fastest way, the easy way, is not always the way of freedom, integrity and grace.

The testing goes on, this Lent, as each of us wrestles with our baptismal calling. The interior dialogue takes place, when we are in a position to listen. I listen whenever I read Scripture, knowing it to be, as Gomes writes, "a very dangerous thing." I know myself to be a beloved child of God, so what does that call forth? Both temptation and vocation. I know myself to have been gifted with choice, so what does that call forth? What have I done with my freedom...that's a matter for a prayer of confession. What will I do with my freedom...that a matter for a time of discernment and listening.

The testing goes on, this Lent, as our community wrestles with our calling in this place and time. The exterior dialogue takes place, when we test our understanding of Scripture and tradition. We are confronted with our choices. We try to listen carefully. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in warning that sometimes “Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too.” Can we listen to the voices of our brothers and sisters, in freedom? Can we choose respond to them with integrity and freedom? And more difficult: to which voices do we listen most deeply?

Lent is a time of hard reflection. Do we need to fast from wasteful habits that hurt our planet? Maybe this is a good time to learn about what that means. Do we need to fast from anger, or as one person put it “What if we took the time in Lent to contact those with whom we have been out of contact, especially those with whom we have stopped communicating because they or we were jerks?” Maybe this is a good time to contemplate what that would mean. Do we need to fast from selfishness and make this a time for more volunteering and charity? Maybe this is a good time to research and find out which agencies help those who touch your heart most deeply. When we engage in these “fasts,” we join our faithful brothers and sisters, other children of Abraham, who seek God in their own ways, in their own seasons.

Tests do not only happen to mythic heroes in folktales. When we follow Jesus into the wilderness, the vistas open up for us. We are children of God. We feel free. We get hungry. We sense a test. We hear voices. What will you do with your perfect freedom?