
Imagine Jesus in the Wilderness With God

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The First Sunday in Lent – Year A

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness.
– Matthew 4:1

When I enter the wilderness, I enjoy imagination. When I enter the wilderness, I do not see Satan. I see God.

Today is the First Sunday of Lent, and for centuries we in the Christian Church have heard the story of Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Most of us—whether Christian or not—have heard versions of this story of Jesus being tempted, over and over again. I am preaching this sermon to us who have heard this story many times.

If you are new to the church, and maybe this is the first time you have heard of these temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, remember the gospel reading itself today; let it percolate in you. It is a powerful story. Go back and read some of the sermons I have previously preached on these temptations. Many of my sermons were quite good and effective!

This year, however, I am preaching a different sermon. I will not preach about temptation, but about imagination. And the imagination I imagine is positive, fabulously positive.

Now, please realize that these traditional temptation tales are also about imagination. There was no tape recorder, or video camera, or iphone, out there in the wilderness with Jesus. The gospel writers imagine what it was like for Jesus to be tempted by Satan, and they write it down. Or, maybe imagination happened this way; Jesus enters the wilderness and it is he who imagines Satan tempting him. Both interpretations are valid! Both interpretations have edified the Christian community over the centuries.

But this year, on the First Sunday in Lent, I present a different imagination.

Let's imagine what it would be like if Jesus had entered the wilderness and it was God speaking to him. Not Satan. What if the story of Jesus in the wilderness had described what God was saying to him, during that holy time.

Well, I think it would have started with the angels. It would have started when the angels came and ministered to Jesus. The usual story ends with the angels. Our bad translation this morning says that they angels "waited on him." It makes it sound like they were paid maids, waiting on the people they were ordered to serve. No. The word is the holy word, "diakoneo," to serve as a willing and voluntary and loving servant of God serves.

Here is what I imagine: When the angels came and ministered to Jesus, maybe at the end of an experience with Satan, here is the message they delivered:

God took Jesus up on a hillside. There was a sermon on the mount. And, after the sermon, it wasn't just Jesus who was hungry. It was everybody. It was the end of the day. It was, maybe five thousand people. Everybody was saying, "where are we going to get enough food for everybody?" Everybody was famished, not just Jesus.

And God said to Jesus, "if you are going to make some bread, it has to be for everybody. It can't be just for you. And it can't be just for your friends, your family, or your disciples. If there are going to be stones made into bread, or words made into bread, then the bread will have to be for everybody."

And so, Jesus did it. He blessed what he had. It might have been what looked like rocks. It might have been a meager two fish and five loaves of bread. But Jesus made it enough. Jesus made it enough for thousands. Jesus made it enough for everyone.

"If you are the Son of God," said God, "if you are going to be related to God, it is your call to feed everybody. Not just yourself. But thousands. We are all fed by the Word of God, and make no mistake, the Word of God is not just for you, for one person only, but the Word of God is for everyone. And the Word of God is love. Bread made into Love. Flesh made into Love. We live by the Word of God, and –have you heard, the Word is love. (Just like the Beatles would say later on. "Have you heard? The word is love!").

So, a summary of number 1: Satan may have said, "Make some bread for yourself." God said make bread for everybody.

And then, a second encounter: In the wilderness, God took Jesus, not to the pinnacle of the temple, in the holy city, but to the depths of the temple, into the bottom basement of the city. Into the slums. Here, said God, here are the angels. The angels are not in the heights. The angels are in the depths. If you are the Son of God, give yourself to the angels, those who are the love of God. These angels are the love of God.

And Jesus did give himself to the angels; and they lifted him up. Because angels are not so stupid and simplistic that they merely follow commands. Satan thinks that angels are just those who are commanded; Satan thought that angels just take orders from God. No, God says. Angels are the persons who get it. Angels understand and act in love, without the need to take orders.

Angels know that God does not need testing. God lives in the freedom and the delight of love. Angels live in the freedom and the delight of love.

A summary of number 2: Satan says, "Make the angels obey orders." God says love the angels and let the angels love you.

And then, a third encounter: God showed Jesus all the world. But God did not show Jesus the kingdoms. All the world, all the people in the world, were not kingdoms. God did not show Jesus the kingdoms of the world. God showed Jesus the people of the world. All the people. And this, these people, are who belong to God. Not the kingdoms.

And God said, "If you fall down and worship me, I will give you all this, all these people of the world. And I will give them to you to love. And you will love them. And they will love you."

Imagine God instead of Satan. Imagine that it is the one true God taking us up to the top of a very high mountain, and showing us –not all the kingdoms of the world—but showing us, instead, all the people of the world. And, imagine God saying, "If you fall down and worship me, if you give yourself to loving me, why, then, you are giving yourself to loving these people! And I will give them all to you in love!"

A summary of encounter number 3: Satan said, "worship me and I will give you kingdoms." God says worship me and I will give you people. I will give you love and people!

So it is that the wilderness is not a place where only Satan speaks. Sure, we can hear the voice of temptation there, and we can learn from that voice, like the Gospel of Matthew and Luke described.

But we can also hear the voice of holiness in the wilderness. We can also hear the voice of God there. We can be ministered to, and served, by holy angels there. And when they speak, when God speaks, the word will be love.

Our world does not need more accusation and condemnation and testing and judgement in this time. Our world needs a voice that is unattached to self-aggrandizement and selfishness, unattached to idiocy and narcissism. Our world needs a voice that has been set free. Our world needs the voice of love. In the wilderness, Jesus heard that voice. And he returned to the world, to serve and to love, just like the angels of God.

AMEN.

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