

## **Giving It Up** Wednesday, 3/1/17

**1** This message is a prelude of sorts to the worship series we're beginning next Sunday. Each week in worship, we'll be challenged to give up something that we don't normally associate with fasting: our anxious desire to control the people and circumstances of our lives; our rigid expectations of what our future holds; our feelings of superiority over other people and the ways they can poison our relationships; the feelings and attitudes regarding others that frames them as enemies instead of brothers and sisters; the best energy of our lives, poured out for others instead of hoarded for ourselves; our need for popularity and the approval of people; and ultimately, on Easter Sunday, our fear of death. As we explore what it might mean for us to give up these destructive attitudes, it's crucial for us to understand that Jesus blazed the trail for us on his wilderness journey, preparing his heart for ministry by facing the temptations we all face when we resolve to be about the business of God in this world.

Have you ever noticed that you can read the same passage from the Bible, ten, twenty, or even 100 times, and each time God's Spirit might draw your attention to something different in the text, and ultimately, something different in your own life? This evening as we walk in the footsteps of Jesus in his wilderness temptations, a scant eleven verses from Matthew's Gospel, I believe that no matter how many times you've heard it, that God has invited you here tonight to experience these words in a fresh way. As we stand together on the edge of our Lenten wilderness, be listening for the still, small voice of God speaking to your heart.

**2** With all the attention we give to the role of the Devil in this passage, it's easy to overlook that Matthew tells us that it was the Holy Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. Why do you suppose that might surprise or upset us? Perhaps it's because we sometimes think that as Christians we should be immune to testing, or that times of testing indicate that we're somehow weak. Where did those ideas come from? Did Jesus ever give us any indication, by teaching or example, that following in his footsteps would be free of trials? Of course not. Even in that great model of prayer Jesus gave us, he instructed us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation" or "lead us not into a time of trial." We wouldn't pray that every week if times of trial weren't an expected part of following Jesus. In fact, Jesus

prayed something very similar in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he was nailed to a cross.

So it's perfectly natural for us to want to escape times of trial, to take any alternate route that avoids a journey through our spiritual wilderness. But Matthew reminds us in verse 1 that it's God's Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness. Could it be that God is leading you into the wilderness tonight, perhaps for a long time?

It can offend our human sense of God's goodness to face the fact that God was complicit in the temptation of Jesus, even as we remember that it was the Devil who tempted Jesus. What possible purpose could God have had in this wilderness trial for his son? Why might God ask the same of us, his beloved children? For Jesus, we know that his wilderness trials came at a crucial point in his life. He had just been baptized in the Jordan River by John, sealed by the Holy Spirit as the beloved Son of God and commissioned to preach this message: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!" Being a proclaimer of the Gospel, in both word and deed, is dangerous business, because hypocrisy comes cheaply and easily. I believe that Jesus, being fully human, had to face the inevitable temptations that he would face when his new ministry was inaugurated. Only by facing them, exposing them as lies, giving them up, and leaving them behind in the wilderness, could Jesus begin his ministry with integrity.

Lent is a time when each of us is invited to follow Jesus through the wilderness, facing the temptations that come our way as proclaimers of the Gospel. Or did you think that being a follower of Jesus meant only sitting safely in our loving fellowship of believers at 609 8<sup>th</sup> Street? Every Good Friday we die to ourselves, and every Easter Sunday we rise with Jesus, sealed again by the Holy Spirit and commissioned to the mission Jesus left us: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Being a proclaimer of the Gospel in both word and deed is still dangerous business, because hypocrisy still comes cheaply and easily. So at least for this season, be open to the Spirit of God leading you into the wilderness, preparing your heart for the inauguration of a new year of ministry on Easter Sunday.

**3** The first temptation faced by Jesus is extremely understandable. Satan said, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” We know that Jesus was hungry, and we know that Jesus certainly could have turned stones into bread. But we have to look beyond the bread to see and experience the real temptation faced by Jesus. As with many if not all temptations, this one starts with a false premise: “If” you are the Son of God. So the first thing Jesus had to give up and leave in the wilderness was any doubt about who he was and whose he was. On his baptism day, God spoke and said to Jesus and all who were with him: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Jesus knew he was the beloved Son of God, so he wasn’t suckered into engaging with that false premise.

What are some of the lies that you’re tempted to believe about who you are and whose you are? How many voices are tempting you by asking, “If you’re young enough....; If you’re strong enough...If you’re rich enough...If you’re good enough...If you’re faithful enough..” Don’t be suckered into the false premises of Satan. Instead, keep this verse from the Gospel of John handy: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, [Jesus] gave power to become children of God”

Notice next that Satan is tempting Jesus to abandon his trust in God’s provision of daily bread. “[C]ommand these stones to become loaves of bread.” Time and time again the Bible warns us of the danger of pretending we are self-sufficient, forgetting that all good gifts come from God. For example, in Deuteronomy 8 we read, “But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.” I want you to pause for a moment to imagine and believe that Jesus was actually tempted by this suggestion by Satan. Forty days is a long time to go without food. We have a tendency to overemphasize the divinity of Jesus and forget that he was also fully human.

Have you ever been tempted to provide for yourself instead of trusting in God’s provision? Abraham was when he didn’t believe God would provide him with a son. I recall a time when I desperately tried to rush God’s plans for the start of my seminary training, flitting from one thing to another, never content to do the one thing God was asking me to do: be still and patiently wait for God’s timing.

Jesus was having none of this first temptation, perhaps because he was so clear about who and whose he was. And so he answered in the most secure and faithful way possible,

leaning not on his human wisdom but the wisdom of God: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

**4** So the Devil tries another round of temptation with Jesus, this time taking him to a high pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem. Notice that he tries the same false premise once again: “IF you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.” Wouldn’t it be nice if we only had to resist temptations once and then we were done with them? But that’s not how Satan works. Our spiritual adversary knows that repetition tends to get the best of us. It only takes one moment of weakness, relying on our own strength instead of our creator’s, to trip us up.

Have you ever overcome temptation on one day, only to succumb to it the next? What were the circumstances? Were you tired? Stressed? Distracted? Or were you riding a wave of success and happiness, only to find that you’d forgotten your need for God? Remember, “Like a roaring lion your adversary the Devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.” You can fortify your defenses by saturating every moment of your life with a deep awareness that you are a beloved child of God.

This time the Devil learns from the example of Jesus and uses Scripture to lay out his temptation: “For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Don’t ever believe that Satan doesn’t know and even use scripture to try to lead us astray. In fact, Satan was the original proof-texter, the master of taking Scripture out of context and using it ways unintended by God.

Henri Nouwen, in *The Name of Jesus*, refers to this second temptation as “the temptation to do something spectacular, something that could win him great applause.” We know for a fact that Jesus gave up the desire to prove himself and win the approval of others and left them behind in the wilderness, because many times in his ministry he refused to perform on demand or as expected. How about you? Who are you looking to for approval? Whose applause would bring the most satisfaction to your heart? The approval and affections of the crowds are fickle, and the one thing that matters before all others is the approval of our Heavenly Father. And so Jesus answers Satan in the most God-honoring way possible, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

**5** For his third pass, Satan throws Jesus a curve ball, dropping the false premise of identity and using another one instead. “Again, the Devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’” Do you see the false premise? Satan is offering something to Jesus that his Heavenly Father has already given him! I think this may be the most insidious of the three temptations and perhaps one of the most commonly used by Satan today. How many times in a single day are we bombarded by pop-up windows, commercials, billboards, radio spots, and phone calls promising to give us safety, control, long life, or happiness? And of course, instead of leading us to contentment, most of the products and programs the advertisers are hawking only lead us to greater dissatisfaction over what we don’t have.

Jesus once again shows us the way by giving up his need to chase the false idols of the world, saying, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” You know, that also isn’t such a bad scripture to plant in your heart to guard against the temptation of avarice.

**6** Tonight we stand together on the edge of the wilderness of Lent. Are you willing to let the Spirit of God lead you for these forty days and nights, even if it involves a time of trial in the spiritual wilderness? Aside from giving up the usual indulgences of chocolate and fancy coffee, what are the deadly attitudes that God might ask you to give up in the wilderness?

It’s so hard for us to surrender our sin to God, and yet it can be so simple. Let me show you one simple way to do it. I invite you to bow your heads and join me with your hearts in this simple prayer: “Lord Jesus, the burden of my sin is too much for me to carry, and I don’t know how to give it up, I don’t have the strength of will on my own, but I know you do. I am willing to follow you into the wilderness, but I need you to lead me and stay by my side, reminding me who I am and whose I am. Amen.”



# *Buffalo United Methodist Church*

*... serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!*



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