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First Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 4: 1-11

“The Temptation of Certitude”

Jesus was about 30 years old when he was tempted by the devil. Thirty is an interesting age. No longer in your 20s, and well past college age, it's about that time people begin to settle down or start to take seriously the fact that they should. Thirty is about the age when people get married for the first time: the average American man is 29, and the average American woman is 27. If you married younger than that, you might have your first child around the age of 30. Maybe even buy your first home. All of those experiences are formative; they're turning points from young adulthood to, well, being a full blown adult; there's even a new word for it: “adulting”. What is it people used to say? Never trust anyone over the age of 30! Yep, official adulthood.

Jesus had a powerful experience at the age of 30 that was formative for him. It happened when his cousin John took him to the Jordan River to be baptized. In that experience he realized who he really was, God's Beloved Son, and that he was different now and because of that the road ahead of him would be different. He now has to decide what to do and how to live out his new sense of God's claim on his life.

And it's precisely at that moment that the Spirit, the Spirit of God, leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. That's important. Because it's not his idea to go into the wilderness. The Spirit leads him there.

For a few minutes, put that nugget of information aside. We'll come back to it.

Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days. That's a very long time to be in the wilderness. It's especially long if you're fasting, like Jesus was. I get hungry for lunch by 10:30; if I wait much past noon without a mid-morning snack, I get hangry. So I can only imagine that by the time the devil met him after 40 days, Jesus was downright famished.

Now most of us, when we think of the devil, probably conjure up a picture of a red human-monster-like figure with horns and pitchfork. That image comes in

part from medieval and renaissance art, which depicted Satan as a monstrous, foul and terrifying being. Ancient literature portrays him as the Father of Lies, the essence of evil. And then there are the movies. The scariest movie I've ever seen is the Exorcist about a little girl being exorcised of a demon. It still scares me all these years later.

In the Old Testament, the word satan is found fairly frequently, but it doesn't refer to "the devil". Satan was more of a description of someone who stands in opposition to God. Satans were adversaries of God, and sometimes they even worked on God's behalf. The satan figure in Job is like this. He's working for God to make sure Job is doing what he should be doing.

When we get to the New Testament, satan starts being referred to as "the devil", and takes on more of the persona we associate the devil with today. He moves from being a noun to a proper noun.

And the idea of the devil as a proper noun has stuck around. Spell-check, for example, insists that I capitalize the word "satan". But this need to turn the devil into a proper noun shouldn't come as a surprise to us. I mean, just think about it. We prefer our adversaries to come with a name, a face:

- Isis
- The Taliban
- Nazis
- Hitler
- Osama Bin Laden
- Just to name a few

All of these people or groups have been, or currently are, depicted as our adversaries. When our adversaries come with a proper noun, we can then name them, and then they're easier to pinpoint, which means we can corner them, control them and, finally, defeat them.

But what if the devil doesn't have a name or face? What if evil is just evil, not personified? Now that is scary. Because when our adversary doesn't have a name or face, it's more elusive, and therefore harder to pinpoint, corner, control and defeat. When we can't put a face on our adversary, it's harder to know who we're fighting. It's harder to separate good from evil. Our opponent in battle is unclear.

What was once an “it”, now becomes murkier. The who turns into a what – and it’s hard to fight a “what”.

Yet when we dig down deep into this story about the temptation of Jesus, it’s not the devil Jesus was fighting. What Jesus was fighting – and notice I used the word “what”, was the temptation to take the easy road of certainty instead of the faithful road of trusting God with one’s life despite one’s doubts and misgivings about the road ahead. And that’s a much more elusive adversary, and therefore a much more dangerous adversary. Is it any wonder we spend more time focusing on our smaller peccadillos that come with a name and a face? Here me out about this, and consider how the devil begins his temptation:

"If you are the Son of God," he says. "You’ll turn stones into bread. If you’re the Son of God, you’ll throw yourself down." In other words, "How do you know you are God's Son?" BY proving without a doubt that you are. "Wouldn't it be better to know for certain?", the devil seems to ask him. "Turn stone to bread, jump from the Temple, worship me...and you will never know doubt again. You will know with all certainty."

That’s a powerful temptation, friends. The power of certainty . . . the ability to never live with doubt again . . . the need to never again second-guess oneself, or need to prove oneself. The need to never feel inadequate, never feel you’re not good enough, powerful enough, smart enough or pretty enough.

Wouldn’t it be nice to live like that? Imagine, knowing with certainty what you’re supposed to do, how you’re supposed to live; the job you’re supposed to have, the school to attend; the next steps to take; that would be a very good world.

That’s a powerful temptation, that world. I can understand why people long for that world; and are attracted to people who offer it.

I can even understand why Jesus could have succumbed to that world. Jesus in the wilderness, hungry, alone, maybe full of doubt and misgivings about his own life and his prospects; maybe full of uncertainty about what he is supposed to do next; maybe tired of the daily routine of his life, bored; maybe feeling alienated from his family; maybe feeling distant from and impatient and alienated from God even. Perhaps we shouldn’t take for granted the fact that Jesus didn’t succumb to

the devil's temptations; after all, as you heard XXXX say, the devil is a very reasonable man and full of compassion.

But that world of certainty isn't what God offers. That's the world the devil offers.

Instead, the Spirit of God pushes us into the wilderness of ambiguity and uncertainty, just like the Spirit pushed Jesus.

Now, we may not want to think that or believe that, after all I don't know many people who like to spend time in the wilderness alone without food and company. We probably think it's a rather cruel joke for the Spirit of God to push Jesus into the wilderness. And we most definitely think it's a cruel joke for the Spirit of God to push us into the wilderness, especially if the only thing we're going to find there is a Bible quoting devil.

But what if we need the wilderness? What if the wilderness is the only way God can get through to us because it's only in those moments of utter despair that we learn who we are, who God is, how to take the next step, how to find comfort in the unknown, and how to trust God's call in the wilderness.

Look, I know living in a proverbial wilderness isn't fun; that it can be scary; that it can feel very chaotic. Living in the wilderness of a major life change, of starting anew under the shroud of grief, of seeking connection in a polarized culture, of finding your way through a difficult season – it's hard, and that's putting it mildly. But the wilderness might be the only place we allow God in, allow God to kneel down beside us as we lay in the dust of our own loss, trauma, and fear. The wilderness might be the only place where God fiercely holds us while everything else dissolves around us.

And being in the wilderness can also be a time for growth and potential, and a time to be creative. Barbara Brown Taylor once said that God does some of God's best work in the wilderness, and it's true. God does. The Bible testifies to it.

The good news of the wilderness is that nothing remains static or still. Grains of sand harden into stone. Bare branches blossom in the spring, and the moss under our feet reminds us that the wilderness is a place of new, resilient life.

And most importantly of all, God comes into our wilderness. That is the promise. We are not alone there. In the wilderness of uncertainty, angels come to wait on

us. The church is there, friends are there, reaching out to touch and comfort and hold us, reminders that God is there, that we are held tightly by the One who loves us.

Angels came to Jesus in the wilderness, and reminded him that he was God's beloved Son, reminded him of the voice he heard on the day of his baptism: "You are my beloved Son: with you I am well pleased."

And angels will come to you, too, in your wilderness. Because you, too, are a beloved child of God.

Amen.