

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Rev. Susan B. Rice

February 10, 2008

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

“Pop Quiz”

Matthew 4:1-11

The season of Lent always begins with Jesus sitting in the wilderness, being tempted by the devil. His hair is still wet from his baptism by John. No sooner did he come out of the water than the dove that landed on him turned into a guide bird, leading him away from the river and into the desert with the voice of God still ringing in his ears; “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

What remained to be seen was what that meant, exactly. How would God’s Beloved behave? What would he say, do, stand for, or oppose. Would God give him special powers or would he make do with the standard human package? No one knew any of that yet, perhaps not even Jesus. He had been ordained by God at the river, but his ministry had not yet begun. There were some things to be settled first, some tests to be passed. Interestingly enough, God did not administer them, but let the devil do it, which points to a strange kind of partnership here. Jesus did not just wander into the desert on his own; he just didn’t decide to go on a hike or a camping trip. No, not at all, Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit who delivered him to the devil for his forty day exam.

Actually, though, the exam came at the end of the forty days, when Jesus was famished. His examiner knew better than to start when he was fresh and well fed. He let Jesus stew first, watching from a distance as God’s Beloved said his prayers. The first couple of weeks he said them standing up. Then when his legs gave out he said them sitting down and finally, near the end, he said them lying flat on the ground with his belt cinched up as tight as it would go. That was when the devil knew it was time to start, when Jesus had run out of his own resources and might be open to accepting a little help.

Now, I have never been to a desert, much less tried to sit in one, but Barbara Brown Taylor recalls her experience of sitting in the desert like this. “The first thing I noticed was how quiet it was, so quiet that I could hear the racket my body makes—gurgle, wheeze, thump. Did you know that if you can get quiet enough, you can actually hear the hum of your own electricity? It makes about as much noise as the motor on a small electric clock, only most of us can’t hear it because of all the other motors around us. In the desert, you can. The second thing I noticed was how fast I got lonely. There is something about a desert that can suck all the self-confidence right out of you. It is so big and so quiet, so empty that you cannot help noticing how small and perishable you are. You remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. You wish you had someone to distract you from that fact, or at least someone to talk to about it. Anyone but the devil, that is. The third thing I noticed was the flies. Matthew never mentions the flies, but based on my own experience I feel certain that if they did not constitute a fourth temptation for Jesus then they at least made the other three harder for him to bear, because nothing can try your spirit like a fly. There I was in the desert, trying to commune with Jesus, and all I could think about was that #*#! Fly – circling my head, buzzing in my ears, trying to crawl up my nose. Flies are a perfect tool of the devil –“So, you think you’re pretty spiritual, try one of these on for size.”

So think about that for a minute – a desert is a desert whether it's Barbara Brown Taylor or Jesus, or you or me sitting there – a desert is still a desert. And even if you haven't been in a desert, there are, no doubt times you have been lonely, vulnerable. Have you ever felt the devil nipping at your heels? If you have, then, then you know something about the desert and I bet one of the things you know is how much you can begin to wonder where God is when you have been stuck in whatever it is that you're stuck in for awhile. Why doesn't God help out, send a rescue team, or at least give you a break? Why doesn't God give you some special powers to conquer whatever it is that needs conquering?

I cannot help but think that Jesus must have been thinking the same thing. Remember, he had just come from his own baptism, where everyone present had seen the sky break open, watched that dove descend and heard the voice introducing God's own son. After something like that, everyone—including Jesus – might have expected him to sprout wings and fly away. They might have looked for him to become some kind of super hero—transformer—or whatever it would take –to cease being human in order to rescue human beings, showing up in the nick of time to snatch them out of danger. Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Look. Look up in the sky, it's a bird, it's a plane, no, no –it's Jesus. A little dramatic, I know—and besides—that's not what happened anyway.

What happened was that he went from one spectacular moment to a long, lonely time in the wilderness, during which he may have wondered if he had imagined the whole thing. For forty days and forty nights there was no sign of God at all. The sky stayed shut. There were no doves. No voice from heaven spoke reassuring words. There was just him, the desert, and finally the devil.

You already know their conversation by heart, so I will not go over it again. The important thing to notice is what was on the devil's test. First he tempted Jesus to practice magic: command these stones to become loaves of bread. Next he tempted Jesus to call on God for special protection: Throw yourself down from the temple. Finally, he tempted him to take control of all the kingdoms of the world: All these I will give you, if you worship me.

All along the devil subtly suggested that Jesus deserved better than God was giving him. Why should the Son of God be famished? Why should he so much as stub his toe, or be subject to Caesar when Caesar should be subject to him? If God could not do better than that by his son, the devil suggested, maybe Jesus should shop around for another father.

Listen to how the devil begins two of his tests: “If you ARE the Son of God . . .” He is daring Jesus to prove who he is by acting like a god instead of a man.

This is the story in which everyone finds out what being the son of God really means. This is the story in which Jesus proves his power not by seizing power, but by turning it down. God's Beloved will not practice magic. He will not ask for special protection or seek political power. As much as it may surprise everyone, including him, he will remain human, accepting all the risks. It is, after all the only way humans will ever learn what “son of God” really means. A Son of God is not someone who is related to God by rising out of humanity, but someone who is beloved by God for sinking into it even when he is famished, even when he is tempted. It is someone who can listen to every good reason in the world for becoming God's rival and remain God's child instead.

Did Jesus deserve better—should Jesus have been able to just poof the devil away and go nanny, nanny, boo, boo. You be the judge of that. But remember, this is chiefly a story about Jesus'

identity, but insofar as we belong to him, it is a story about our identity too. There are plenty of times when we too are tempted to believe that we deserve bigger and better than what we have. Plenty of times when we are envious because others seem to have more things, more clout, more power. That devilish voice in our heads says things like, "If you are a child of God, shouldn't things be going a little smoother for you? If you are really a Christian, I mean --- shouldn't you be happier, healthier, richer, safer?"

You know what to say back now, right? "Away with you Satan! I would rather be a hungry child of God than a well-fed player on your team!"

If you can manage that, then chances are very good that before long you will hear another voice in your head, ten thousand times more beautiful than the first. "This is my beloved child," the voice will say, "in whom I am well pleased."