

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

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Luke 4:1-13

## Outward Bound for the Soul

A young man was sent to Spain by his company to work for a year. He accepted because it would enable him to earn enough to marry his long-time girlfriend. Their plan was to pool their resources and put a down payment on a house when he returned.

As the lonely weeks went by, she began expressing doubts that he was being true to her. After all, Spain is populated by beautiful women. The young man declared that he was paying absolutely no attention to the local girls. "I admit," he wrote, "that sometimes I'm tempted. But I fight it. I'm keeping myself for you."

In the next mail, the young man received a package. It contained a note and a harmonica. "I'm sending this to you," his girlfriend wrote, "so you can have something to take your mind off those girls." The young man wrote back that he was practicing on the harmonica every night and thinking only of her.

When the young man returned home his girl was waiting at the airport. As he rushed forward to embrace her, she held up a restraining hand and said sternly, "Hold on there. First I want to hear you play that harmonica!"

Every year the season of Lent starts with the story of how Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by the devil.

Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness – and we know that 40 days was not necessarily exactly 40 days, but was the way they used to refer to a long time – that's why Noah was on the ark for 40 days, Moses and the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. It's like when we say there were tons of people there.

I like to think that Jesus' time in the wilderness and our season of Lent (also 40 days not counting the Sundays) are like Outward Bound for the soul – where you learn as much about WHO you are as you do about HOW to survive.

Sure we need the tools and gear for the journey, but they are just that, tools and gear. The point is deeper – who are you and from where do you derive your inner resources for the difficult times – the wildernesses – both literal and figurative.

It's clear that being a devout, religious and faithful person does not ward off temptation! Temptation is a part of the human condition. And oddly it seems that we are most tempted when we are most connected to God. At least that would follow from our lesson today.

Notice that the temptations that Jesus faces are not bad things.

He's hungry – and he's tempted with food

As ruler of all the earthly kingdoms he could eliminate inequality and injustice

As a “superpower” he could heal and correct all that's wrong in the world

Temptation always comes to us shrouded in goodness - in plausibility - in attractiveness. It comes as an outgrowth of the circumstances that we are in, circumstances that have their own logic and their own appeal.

We face situation after situation everyday, some of them relatively trivial, and some of major consequence, in which the choice is not between good and evil, but between what is hard and what is easy.

I am so aware of this distinction when I think of the temptations that teenagers face. We ask them to say no to drugs, alcohol and sex – all are obviously dangerous. And it's easy to say no to drugs – but it's not so easy to say no to the friend who's handing you the joint.

To be tempted is to accept what comes naturally:

food when hungry

sex when lonely

power when in authority

impatience when dealing with the slow, the old or the feeble

rudeness when dealing with those who are paid to serve

hatefulness when dealing with those who contradict you

pride when thinking of our own generosity, abilities, tolerance, or faithfulness

It all comes so easily – naturally even. That's what makes temptation – or the devil – as in our lesson today – so sneaky. It appeals to our natural impulses.

Like the story of the mom who was teaching her young son about the dangers of temptation. She asked him what he'd do if he was in the candy aisle of the grocery store and no one else was around and the devil came and encouraged him to take a piece of candy. The boy innocently replied, “I'd say ‘thank you’.”

Giving in to temptation comes naturally for us. So how are we to withstand what comes so easily? What is our spiritual harmonica?

We are strengthened in the wilderness by our identity as children of God. This is really what the temptation story is all about – for Jesus as well.

Right before he is led out (by the Holy Spirit) he is baptized and God declares to him, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22) Jesus' identity as the Son of God is affirmed and confirmed – there is no doubt here.

And the devil knows this – in fact in his third attempt to tempt Jesus, he appeals to his identity – (v. 9) “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here...” The word for “if” here is actually more accurately translated as “since” – “Since you are the Son of God,” What the devil thinks will convince Jesus to cave in, is in fact what enables him to prevail.

We will never know what it was like for Jesus out there – with out food, or human contact for nearly six weeks. But we do know what the temptations and wildernesses in our own lives feel like – the loneliness, the confusion, the pit in the stomach that won't go away.

But we also have OUR identity as Beloved Children of God. Christ's story is our story and he has showed us the way. When tempted with the easy way, Jesus drew from his heart to his mind the word of God that he'd been taught:

One does not live by bread alone  
Worship the Lord your God and serve only him  
And do not put the Lord your God to the test.

We are strengthened for the journey by recalling to our minds our baptism in which our identity is rooted. Martin Luther used to do this all the time. Remember he was a Roman Catholic monk who was challenging the teachings and beliefs of his church and he was exiled for it. He used to cross himself and say, "Martin, you are baptized (and put his hand on his forehead where the water had been put) in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

That's a good habit to get into – I commend it to you.

And our identity as Christians is strengthened by scripture. That was Jesus' first defense against the devil – he went straight to the scriptures (all from Deuteronomy) to deflect what the devil was throwing at him. In fact the word "devil" comes from the Greek *diabolos* which is two words – *dia* & *bollo* – which mean to throw across. The devil is the one who throws across at us.

And the Word of God is our best defense.

I had a roommate in college who had a serious boyfriend and they were struggling mightily NOT to have sex. And I could tell when she'd been particularly tempted on a date, because she'd arrive back to the room and immediately open her Bible. At the time it seemed corny to me; but looking back on it, I admire her for having such a solid foundation. For knowing that her decisions and the way she lived her daily life must be rooted in her faith and in the scriptures.

So knowing and reading your Bible is key to surviving the wilderness. And the other thing is prayer.

There's an interesting connection between the three temptations Jesus faces and the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus teaches just a few chapters later in Luke. The first three lines of the prayer address the three temptations in reverse order:

Our Father, holy is your name – God is not to be tested  
Your kingdom come – It's God who is to be the ruler of earthly kingdoms, not Jesus  
Give us each day our daily bread – God provides daily bread for us

If you pray no other prayer in the face of temptation you'll be well supplied for the challenges of the wilderness.

Remember who you are – Beloved Child of God – Baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Traditionally the church has encouraged Christians to approach the season of Lent as a time of soul searching and intentional spiritual growth, an Outward Bound for the soul.

So, during these next five weeks, allow yourself to be led into a hard place. You won't be alone – the Holy Spirit will be your guide. And don't forget to take your Bible and your harmonica.

Amen.