

**“It’s about the Who, Not the What”**

Today’s gospel takes us back a bit in the story about Jesus.

During the season of Epiphany we moved

from the story of 3 kings visiting Jesus when he was a baby, to his baptism,  
to his calling of the disciples, to his preaching, teaching, and healing,  
and finally to his transfiguration, not long before his death.

But today we take a step back in the story to the part right after his baptism.

If you’ll recall, it was at his baptism that a voice from heaven announced,

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.”

And that’s where today’s story picks up.

*“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”*

If we hadn’t read the story a hundred times, we might be surprised at this!

I mean, Jesus has just made the headlines, and if he were a smart leader, he’d capitalize on that right away!

He’d come up with a strategic plan, gather the people & other resources he needs to carry it out,

have some meetings, and set out to accomplish his goals.

Except that that’s not what happens.

Before he can do anything at all, the Spirit leads him into the desert for a time of testing.

And the question is: why?

Well I think that becomes clear in the tempter’s very first words, *“If you are the Son of God...”*

In other words, Jesus has just been baptized and at that baptism he has heard these words,

*“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.”*

And now he needs to figure out what those words mean.

What does it mean that he is God’s beloved Son? How exactly has he pleased God?

And how is supposed to live fully into that identity and that call?

There were likely dozens of possibilities swirling around in his mind,

but three are recorded here, and the first 2 begin in exactly this same way, *“If you are the Son of God...”*

We get this story every year, so you’ve probably heard scores of sermons on it,

but what struck me this year was that all 3 questions and answers have some things in common.

The first thing is that the tempter is focused on getting Jesus to Do something:

turn stones into bread, throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple, and go after worldly wealth and power.

Now it’s not that such things are inherently wrong.

If he later turned water into wine, why not stones into bread?

If he defied the law of gravity by walking on water, why not by jumping off the temple?

If he could produce enough food to feed 5000 people, he was certainly using his power!

No, the issue wasn’t about WHAT Jesus was asked to do.

And what makes that clear is Jesus’ answers to the 3 questions.

*“One lives...by every word that comes from God’s mouth...”*

*“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”*

*“Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”*

The temptation, you see, for Jesus and for us, is thinking that it’s about WHAT we’re doing.

But as Jesus shows us, it’s not.

It’s not about WHAT we’re doing, but about WHY we’re doing it.

If we're doing it because we think it's a good idea, or someone else thinks it's a good idea, or a group of people thinks it's a good idea, or we've read that it's a good idea, then we're succumbing to the tempter.

Because according to Jesus, it's not about the WHAT, but about the WHY and the WHY has to do with the WHO.

Notice again that the focus of the temptation is on Jesus, and on what Jesus should do, but all three of Jesus' responses shift the focus from himself to God, from the WHAT of the question to the WHO that mattered.

The temptations & testing that are the most dangerous in our lives are not the big obvious ones, but the tiny subtle ones.

A big and obvious temptation would be to shoot someone with a gun – which may not be one that most of us would encounter nor one to which we would succumb.

But the tiny subtle temptation to which most of us succumb would be to fail to do anything to stop the mass shootings in our country that are happening with such increasing frequency that many barely make the news.

Big and obvious temptations are often to do things that are clearly wrong.

But a tiny and subtle temptation is often to do something that seems good,

but may have the unintended consequence of keeping a bad system in place.

or it may simply be that that particular good thing is not what God wants in that situation.

And that's because to be a Christian is not about living a moral life, but a faithful life.

And there's a difference.

If we live a faithful life, it will be a moral life;

but if our goal is to live a moral life, then we are not living a faithful one.

That's the point of this story of Jesus being tested in the desert:

it wasn't about the tasks that he might end up performing,

but it was totally and completely about 1 thing: about his relationship with God.

To me this is one reason that congregations are in decline – because we keep focusing on the WHAT.

We focus on worship and service and fellowship.

We focus on buildings and locations and mergers and partnerships.

We focus on attendance and giving.

We focus on documents and reports and meetings.

None of those things are bad in and of themselves, and some may end up being important.

But they can't be the church's focus.

In our work with the Forward Leadership program several years ago,

we were advised to focus first on our WHY,

and then out of the WHY would flow the WHATs,

and from the WHATs would flow the HOWs.

But there is something even more important than the WHY, and that's the WHO.

Feeding hungry people can be a good thing. After all, even Jesus did it a few times.

But if we decide on our own to feed hungry people then we are succumbing to the temptation to put the focus on us and on our actions.

Instead, what Jesus makes clear in our lesson today is that when someone suggests,

“Why don't you feed hungry people?”,

our answer should be, “That's an interesting idea. Let's ask God what he thinks.”

Which is what our Lenten journey is all about – spending more time with God

so that we can better understand what it is that God desires us to do.

Whether it's in our individual, personal lives, or in our life together as a congregation, the most important thing we can do is to deepen our relationship with God.

And that brings up the other important thing in this story.  
It's not only the WHATs that need to be determined by God, but the WHENs as well.

We read that Jesus stayed in the desert, DOING NOTHING except praying and fasting for FORTY days.  
Now if you know anything about scripture, you'll know that the number 40 shows up in many stories.  
In the story of Noah it rained for 40 days and 40 nights.

Moses spent 40 days on Mt Sinai.

The Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness.

And Jesus spent 40 days in the desert being tempted by the devil.

The number 40 in these instances is not meant to be taken literally; it simply means "a long time".

And what is a "long" time? Well, it's an amount a time that feels long.

So Jesus didn't go into the desert thinking that he was going to stay there for 40 days;

he didn't count the days down until he was done;

he simply went into the desert and prayed and fasted there for what seemed a very long time.

The Spirit didn't give him a time-table or schedule.

He simply followed the Spirit and fasted & prayed – & fasted & prayed – & fasted & prayed –  
until the devil departed.

What this shows us is that our primary focus is not to be on either the WHAT or the WHEN –  
it's to be on God and God alone.

To me that is the main reason that mainline Protestantism is in decline –  
because we have completely missed that our individual lives and our life together  
is not about living a moral life, but about living a faithful one.  
It's not about the WHATS or the HOWS, but the WHY and the WHO.  
It's not about what we want to do, but about what God wants us to do.

Our Lenten journey is modeled on Jesus' time in the wilderness.

The Spirit leads us to spend time with God – both as individuals and as a faith community –  
worshipping, praying, reading God's Word, listening, and fasting.

The Spirit leads us to spend that time

so that we can come to a deeper understanding of who God is and who we are to God,

of God's plan and purpose for our individual life and our life together,

of what it is that God is calling us to be and to do, and how and when God wants us to act.

While in its outer form, the church is an organization, an institution, a business,  
at its heart the church is spiritual.

And only when we focus on the spiritual foundation, will the structure be able to stand.

Only when our spiritual roots go deep, will we be able to grow and thrive and bear fruit.

The temptation is to think that we can meet the challenges before us

if we focus on the WHAT and the WHEN and the HOW, but scripture shows us otherwise.

For if even Jesus had to spend a long time figuring out what God was calling him to do,

why would we ever think we could do less?

I believe that God has something far greater in mind for each & every one of you than you have even imagined.

I believe that God has something far greater in mind for Salem than we have yet imagined.

An exciting journey lies before us which will be full of challenges

but which will also bring a greater and deeper joy than we've ever known before.

I can't paint you an entire picture because all I've seen thus far has been a glimpse,

but that glimpse is enough to fill me with all the faith and hope and joy I need to keep me praying.

I invite you to join me as we follow the Spirit into the wilderness to pray and fast,

to listen and learn, and to discover and discern what God has in mind –

for each of us and for all us together here at Salem. Amen