

Luke 4 1-12 14.02.16 Jesus in the Wilderness NvF

May the words of my mouth...

Today is Valentine's Day, but rather than thinking about cards and roses, the Gospel reading turns our minds to the desert wilderness and how Jesus' spiritual retreat is the guide for our Lenten reflections.

But we have a problem with today's passage. How should we read it?

Is it a piece of historical narrative. If so, how we know what happened. Did a scribe follow Jesus around, or maybe Jesus talked about events afterwards, which is a bit odd, when you consider what the passage is about. Others say it's an allegory, telling us important truths, but not in the form of a historical account. Either way, we are shown *who* Jesus is, the faithful Son of God and how he points the way to our own spiritual renewal.

Jesus wanders the desert for forty days. Take a note of the number forty. Where have we heard it before?

The Israelites wander in the wilderness for forty years, after the exodus from Egypt. During this time, they are often faithless and frequently rebel against God. So when we hear that Jesus is in the desert for forty days, we are being shown how Jesus returns to and reworks this story.

The passage describes that Jesus is tested. The word tested, or tempted (verse 2) is the same one used in the Greek version of the Exodus story for testing the Israelites (e.g. Exod. 16:4; 17:2; Deut. 8:2; Ps. 94:9). They fail their challenges but Jesus shows us a different way.

Jesus is fasting and is challenged to feed himself, by creating his own bread. In the Exodus narrative, God miraculously provides manna for the Israelites (Exod 16: 14-21). Jesus also has this power, the power to create bread to feed himself, but instead, he quotes a passage of scripture, said by Moses to the Israelites in the desert:

"[God] [taught] you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna..to make you understand that one **does not live by bread alone, but by every word** that comes from the mouth of the Lord" Deut 8:3 (*adapted* from NRSV).

True faith comes from depending on God, by feeding on the word of God, not by creating our own provision.

For us, *Jesus* is the Word of God, our spiritual nourishment and the faithful Son who leads the way by depending on the Father and not his own resources. This is a challenge to us also. How often do we depend on our own resources, rather than turn to God, the source of everything that nourishes and sustains.

Lent is a time to re-evaluate how material things distract us from our dependence on God.

In the second temptation, Jesus is shown all the kingdoms of the world. We know this is a vision, because Jesus sees everything in an instant. If he worships the Devil, he will earn the world in return. Jesus could be faithless, like the Israelites in the wilderness, but instead, Jesus quotes a passage from Deuteronomy:

"The Lord your God you shall [worship] and God alone shall you serve" (Deut 6:13, adapted from NRSV)

Jesus' obedience to God might rework another wilderness scene. Moses complains about the faithlessness Israelites, who are worshipping idols. God tells Moses to go up a mountain, to hear his judgement:

"Go up to the top of [mount] Pisgah and look around you to the west, to the north, to the south, and to the east. Look well, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. But charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, because it is he who shall cross over at the head of this people and who shall secure their possession of the land that you will see." Deut 3:27-28

Moses was the head of a faithless people, but Jesus is faithful to God. He is our Joshua, who will bring us into the Promised Land.

The third test is for Jesus to throw himself down from the top of the temple in Jerusalem. Will God save him from harm, because Psalm 91 says God protects his chosen one:

"For he will command his angels concerning you,
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone" Ps. 91: 11-12

Jesus could command his own fate, but instead, he trusts his Father's rule and does not put God to the test (Deut. 6:13).

This third act of obedience might rework Moses coming down mount Sinai, only to find that in place of God's rule, the impatient Israelites have gone their own way, made their own rules and their own god; a Golden calf, which they worship (Exodus 32: 1). They were faithless, but Jesus was faithful. He will not put God to the test.

In each of these narratives, Jesus shows how to be faithful to God, overturning the previous examples of faithlessness in the wilderness.

During our season of Lent, we also enter a time of spiritual reflection and can ask, where do we put our faith? Do we trust in our own resources, look to the world rather than God and create our rules and own Golden Calves?

Or are we like Jesus, able to say:

"I will worship God alone; God alone will I serve" (Deut 6:13, adapted)

Because, if we are not ready to be that faithful, with the press of our lives and worries of the day, perhaps in place of thinking about Valentine cards roses, or all the other things that clutter up our lives, maybe it's time for a bit of a spiritual spring cleaning.

Amen.