

March 1, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Genesis 2:15–17, 3:1–7; Romans 5:12–19; Matthew 4:1–11](#)

TITLE: The Jesus Track

By the Rev. Sheldon Sorge

The lectionary does a bit of a stutter step as we enter Lent. We were making steady progress beginning with the Christmas cycle—the Nativity stories led to Epiphany and the visit of the Magi, from which we moved forward to the baptism of Jesus, then on forward into the calling of his disciples and his early ministry. Then suddenly we take a strange leap backward the first Sunday of Lent, to the event immediately following Jesus’ baptism, namely, his wilderness temptation. Even without the lectionary’s “help” we all too often think that Jesus’ baptism, complete with the voice from heaven sealing his vocation, was all that was needed to launch him into ministry.

Think again. A call experience, even one with an audible voice from heaven, is not by itself enough to ready Jesus for ministry. Nor is it for us. After his call he had to go through wilderness deprivations, just like those preparing for ministry do today. Like Jesus of old, Presbyterians preparing for ministry today must go through three decisive hoops—committee on preparation, seminary, and ordination exams. The difference is that in his case, the text is honest enough to label them “temptations” rather than simply “hoops.”

So, Jesus had to go to seminary too, before he was ready to engage his calling. And like seminarians today, he had teachers to help him along. “Angels came and waited on him,” the text says. I like that—teacher as “angel.” Isn’t that the image that comes to mind when you think of the professors at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary? But the main teacher in the story has a different designation—“the devil.” I know the guy. Seriously, I do. He and his family go to the church I attended in Louisville. When he was an undergraduate at my alma mater, Duke University, he was the “Blue Devil” mascot. But he’s a nice guy – even though some Duke-haters probably think otherwise, especially as we enter the “March Madness” that leads up to the NCAA basketball championship.

The devil Jesus faces has a long history of doing everything possible to derail human beings from God’s intention for them, from time immemorial. Every one of us has dealt with this teacher again and again. And not just in seminary. But in seminary the tempter shows up with particularly beguiling entreaties. They sound wonderful—but they inevitably seek to derail us from the destiny for which God has called and appointed us. At the end of the story Jesus gives the devil another term of endearment—“Satan,” he calls him, “accuser” or “obstructionist,” the epithet he uses on Peter later when Peter tries to block Jesus’ progress to the cross.

It is here in the wilderness that Jesus establishes the track for his life’s work. He was able to stay on track in the garden of Gethsemane and on to the cross because he had already, beginning with his wilderness temptation, developed a resolve to obey his call at all personal cost. He did it, Hebrews says, because of the joy that he knew lay at the

end of that path. For Jesus, the joy of fulfilling his God-appointed vocation was far greater than the near-term pleasures with which the tempter might entice him.

The main reason this text gets served up today is because we are beginning Lent, a forty-day journey of self-denial that harks back to Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness. Jesus' forty-day fast comes at the outset of his ministry, while Lent is timed to coincide with his final days. But that's a mere quibble. The point is that Jesus' wilderness journey is more than a story about *his* ministry development—it is also an invitation for *us* to walk that track with him as his followers. In Matthew's Gospel, as soon as Jesus emerges from the wilderness he begins to preach and calls out disciples to follow him. What an irresistible proposal! This guy who's been trudging a wilderness road with nothing to eat and temptations on every side wants us to follow him?! Following Jesus has entailed, among other things, enduring constant temptations to branch off onto easier paths.

The three temptations to get off-track inevitably assail all who seek to follow Jesus. First temptation: Use your God-given gifts to satisfy your personal desires. Take these stones—living stones, people whom you are called to serve—and turn them into bread that will fatten you. In the story Jesus is *famished*. And that happens to all who would follow his way. We become desperately hungry for “normal life” (whatever that may be), to be free to satisfy our desires without restraint. Why not take advantage of our ability to turn stones into bread? What's wrong with enjoying the benefits of being people of faith?

A second temptation strikes: Set aside your own good sense and cast yourself on God's good mercy. Be reckless if need be; throw yourself off that tall Temple (or, perhaps, ELPC) spire! Better to go out in a blaze of glory than to do ordinary things that gain us no attention. The tempter urges us to cast aside reason and restraint, simply to jump for jumping's sake. And we wonder why ministers have such a high burnout rate.

A third time the tempter strikes: All the world is yours, if only you will *worship* me. That word in Greek means literally to kiss. Make me your best friend, your counselor and confidant, and the world will be your oyster. It's the easy way to ministry—follow the way of the devil, the way of flattery, of double-speak, of self-serving half-truths, of calculated charm. Cater to what the people want. Do all this, and the world will be all yours. Trust me. It works. Easily. But the way of the Gospel, the Jesus track, leads instead to a cross.

The Gospel writer wants us to recognize the voice of the tempter as the same one that wooed Eve in the garden of Eden. What a smooth line—just enough truth to be believable. Satisfy your desire for something good to eat! Take the *whole* of the good earth, seize it for yourself. Why be satisfied with “just” the rest of the garden? God has denied you something good—go on, try it out, and you'll see for yourself. Eve is first to eat, but Adam sins twice by eating with Eve and then refusing to own up to his responsibility in the affair when confronted later by God. The tempter offers a *shortcut to satisfaction*—the satisfaction of being in control, of being “like God.” And if we think that

this Genesis 3 story is only an ancient tale, we haven't been honestly looking in the mirror.

Eve is *us*. Adam is *us*. We *all* have succumbed to these beguilements. We *all* have turned away from the life God gives, pawing after what we think will be a better life—more satisfaction, more knowledge, more power. And in it we *all* make the judgment that God's gifts are not enough. Like children fighting for the bits of candy thrown into the crowd by firefighters in a parade, we scramble for what our grubby hands can grasp for ourselves and steal from others.

So as with Eve and Adam, the tempter sidles up to Jesus with an enticing offer: Indulge yourself! You deserve it. God's provision and promises are nice enough, but my offer is better, and it can be yours. But something goes wrong. For the first time in the story of humanity, the tempter's unfailingly successful ploys fall flat. Jesus walks away hungry, unrecognized, and unprotected—until his other teachers, the ministering angels, come alongside. But as hungry and desolate as he may be, he emerges the victor.

In today's Romans text, Paul points us to the two archetypal human stories—of Adam and Eve in Eden, and of Jesus from Nazareth. The first story uncovers the root of our sinfulness—like Eve, we all heed the impulse to acquire for ourselves that which rightly belongs to others, and like Adam we all blame others for the fact that we have broken faith with God. Eden's sin drives a wedge between human beings and their God, as well as driving a wedge between each other. Suddenly they have to cover up, to hide from each other and from God. I buy the tempter's line, because it puts *me* at the center of everything, and I like that! So what, if it alienates me from God and from my human family? At least I get everything I want, and that's all that matters. And if we as individuals live this story line out, as nations we do so with all the more vengeance. Only our country, only our way of life, only those who look like us matter; to hell with the rest of the world.

Then along comes Jesus, Paul's second human archetype. The tempter is still on the scene, but Jesus demonstrates that, in the power of the divine Spirit poured out upon us in baptism, humanity *can* live according to God's original intention. We *can* trust God to provide all we need, without having to put God to the test. Jesus shows that when we live in the power of the Spirit, our human story is no longer merely one of lockstep parade down the track of Adam's and Eve's capitulation to the tempter. We *can* claim, or better, we *have been* claimed by a new human story, a new way of being. We can't escape the tempter on our pilgrimage, but in the power of the Spirit that descended upon Jesus in his baptism and drove him to the Seminary of the Desert, who empowered him for ministry, and who raised him from the dead—in this power, *this same Spirit* is also raising *us* from the death of self-serving disregard for God's way. *This same Spirit* is upon *us* and with *us* and among *us*, healing our alienation from our Creator, as well as the myriad divisions that separate us from one another. *This same Spirit* makes one what has in every age and society been divided. *This same Spirit* restores us to the humanity for which God created us.

The theological name for this healing of ancient and cosmic divides is *atonement*, literally “at-one-ment”—making whole that which has been torn apart. Making whole our relationship with God and with each other by being freed from the need to control, to be like God, to curry favor with the powers of the world so we can be in control of our world.

The Table set before us is the center of our at-one-ment. Here we are reunited with the One who gave his life to show that death’s power is forever broken. Here we discover there is enough food and drink for everyone – no need to hoard. Here we discover that all God’s children have their place at the same Table – separation from each other is impossible. Here we become true to our original design. The Table testifies that God *is* good, that God’s provision for us *is* sufficient, that our place in God’s realm *is* secure. Here we gather strength to follow Jesus through the wilderness, knowing that Christ’s victory over the tempter is stronger than Eden’s submission to the tempter. If in Adam all die, how much more in Christ are all made alive! *This* is our true human story! Thanks be to God. Amen.