

The Gifts of Jesus: Himself

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

March 5, 2017

Matthew 4:I-II

Perhaps you noticed this. But the very first word of the Bible passage that I just read is kind of a funny way to start.

“Then.”

That’s how the passage begins.

“Then.”

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

That “then” is like a sign that points in two directions. It points forward, to what happens next. And it also points backward, acknowledging what has just come before.

It turns out that what happened just before is pretty important for understanding what happens next.

Jesus was baptized. That’s what happens right before, the Lord’s baptism by John.

Without a doubt, it sure was a holy moment. The heavens opened, the Spirit of God settled upon Jesus like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Now you might think that after such a spiritual high it would be time for Jesus to get out there and start making a difference in the world. You might think that Jesus would, and should, go and show everyone who he is.

But God had other plans. Right after his baptism, Jesus was led out into the wilderness.

He didn’t just wander out there by accident.

He hadn’t taken a wrong turn.

His GPS hadn’t been in need of an update.

(“Recalculating....”)

No, the Spirit led him there: on purpose, with a purpose, with a plan, out into the wilderness.

Now, of course, the wilderness was a location, a place remote but reachable, a physical locale that you could travel to, something you could use a map to find, or maybe just follow the road signs.

But the wilderness wasn’t *just* that. There was more to it than that. Because the wilderness was not just about maps and coordinates. The wilderness was also about the *soul*.

You see, for the people of the Bible the wilderness meant something. For them, it long symbolized a place of challenge. It meant for them a region where you’d confront evil inside and outside, yet also a zone in which God would confront *you*, outside and within. For them the wilderness was a land where the soul would wrestle with both God and God’s enemies.

It was in the wilderness where Moses encountered the burning bush from which he heard God speak.

It was in the wilderness where God's chosen nation had wandered for forty years so they could be tested and fashioned more truly into the nation that God chose.

It was in the wilderness where Jacob wrestled with a mysterious and holy visitor at night.

It was in the wilderness where David hid from King Saul.

It was in the wilderness where the people expectantly made long pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the holy city, for worship in the temple, singing psalms on the way, praying that on their journey God would keep them from harm.

It was in the wilderness where the people were forcefully marched on their way to exile, suffering at the hands of other nations the judgment God had set upon them.

So, it was the wilderness that came to symbolize all such wrestling, those places of spiritual struggle and ordeals of the soul, where God's people would encounter challenge and testing.

And because the wilderness is not just a physical location but even more a spiritual one, it is familiar to us. We know something about it. We know something about the wilderness. We sure do.

We know about solitude and the spiritual threat it poses.

We know about empty time and empty space.

We know about doubt and confusion.

We know about despair and temptation.

We know the lonely geography of the soul, how within its extreme barrenness it is almost impossible to hide, how there your truest self is so painfully revealed and so honestly exposed.

When you go out to the wilderness, you find that its desolation leaves no room for self-deception and crowds out all pretending.

When you go out to the wilderness, you meet, very often, no one, leaving you free to meet ... yourself:

naked,

alone,

without resources to prop up the self-image you like to convey.

Because truly, the wilderness brings out yourself. It reveals who you really are. And what you see just about kills you.

Even so, there is at times something *holy* about the wilderness. There you wrestle not only with your demons but also with God. Because God sometimes leads you into the wilderness

to refine you,

to correct you,

to break you down,

to strip away all that you place between yourself and God,

so you will truly be yourself, so who you really are — the “you” God made you to be — would ... finally ... be revealed.

The wilderness is where Jesus went. Again, he didn't just happen to go there. It wasn't by mistake or by chance. He went there because the Spirit led him there. And he goes there for a purpose: “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness ... *to be tempted by the devil.*”

He went into the wilderness to be tempted. Now, it's important for us to know that in the language of the New Testament, "tempted" is the same word as "tested." Sometimes we'll translate it as "tempted" and other times as "tested." Sometimes a clear distinction between these two meanings may be important. But here I think that something of *both* meanings is intended: testing *and* temptation. Jesus went into the wilderness to be tested by God and to be tempted by the devil.

The testing begins right away, as Jesus embarks on a fast of forty days and forty nights. Talk about being tested!

At the end of this, weakened by severe hunger, he is in the perfect condition to be tested even more, and he is primed for being tempted. And the point of all these tests and temptations is to see whether he will stay true: true to God, true to himself.

So the devil, the "tempter," comes to him, with three simple requests.

Just turn some stones into bread, Jesus.

Just jump off, Jesus.

Just bend the knee, Jesus.

What harm could there be in any of these, when compared with all the good that would come?

That's the thing about temptations. They always involve something attractive, which is to say something that appears *good*. We aren't tempted by what repulses us. We're tempted by what attracts us! Speaking only for myself, I can be tempted by chocolate, but never by liver. Tammi would never be tempted by lima beans. A temptation always has something that, in some sense, looks good to us, that appears lovely or valuable or worthy or pleasing.

These temptations from the devil were *temptations* for Jesus precisely because of the real benefit that might result. What harm could there be?

Shouldn't the son of God be given nourishment so he can do his holy work?

Wouldn't a dramatic and public self-sacrifice, right away, be such an effective way to reach the people?

Wouldn't the ministry of Jesus be such a success if he were to have control over all the nations of the world?

Each of these temptations had some potential for good that made them attractive, and thus something that would tempt one who valued that good:

Holy work.

Outreach.

Influence.

The great writer on Christian spirituality Henri Nouwen once said about these temptations that in the solitude of the wilderness, Jesus "was tempted with the three compulsions of the world: to be relevant ('turn stones into bread'), to be spectacular ('throw yourself down'), and to be powerful ('I will give you all these kingdoms')."¹

To be relevant, spectacular, and powerful.

¹*The Way of the Heart*, p. 25. Quoted in Alyce M. McKenzie, *Matthew*, Interpretation Bible Studies, (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1998), p. 22.

I think I can relate. Can't you?

What strikes me about these temptations is how practical they sound. They're all about effectiveness and results and pragmatism. Satan seems to be saying to Jesus, "Okay, so you're the son of God. Now get out there and act like it! Make a difference in the world! Don't be wasting time with fasts and solitude and suffering. Take my practical advice and get on with being a son of God people can really get behind and follow."

Sure, in some ways these temptations are remote from us. How many of *you* were struggling over whether you should turn stones into bread? How many of you have been offered control over all the nations of the world?

But in other ways, in ways deeper and deeply important, they are so much like the temptations many of us have so often.

Often, we are tempted to be seen as relevant.

Often, we are tempted to impress others.

Often, too often, we are tempted to wield power over others.

We do want — for ourselves, for our families, for our church — relevance, and esteem, and power. Wouldn't it be great if we had these? Wouldn't these be so useful into making our ministry as Christians a great success?

And yet the sure and certain result, shown time and time again throughout history, is that when Christians seek relevance and esteem and power, they corrupt themselves and cause their ministries to collapse.

I fear that, in this country, it is happening again.



Ultimately, then, the test for Jesus was what kind of "Son of God" he would be. Would he really be the Son of God that his heavenly Father had declared him to be in his baptism? Or would he instead be a *relevant* and *impressive* and *powerful* son of God? Which of these sons, the first or the second, would he be?

If you're concerned about apparent results, then you've got to say that this second son had the promise of being very effective. A relevant, pragmatic, effective, powerful, popular son of God — how excellent that would be!

But that would not be the Son sent by the Father, the Son sent precisely

to be baptized,

to suffer,

to bless the lowly,

to offend the powerful,

to walk the path to the cross at a time of the Father's choosing,

and likewise in God's time to die.

Jesus rejects the temptations. And in doing that he rejects the model of a pragmatic son of God seeking to be seen by others as relevant and spectacular and powerful. He refuses to become *that* son of God, a son who might be popular and effective in gathering the multitudes

and even in meeting their perceived needs, but who is not the Son sent by the Father, not the Son he really is.

Instead, he chooses to be *this* kind of Son of God:

who saves the lost by going into the wilderness,
who redeems the tempted by enduring temptation,
who raises the dead to life by dying.

That is the Son of God whom the Father sent into the world and blessed at his baptism. And in choosing against the temptations, Jesus chose to be *that* kind of Son.

Which means that he chose to be ... *himself*.



This choice Jesus made is his gift to us. It is one of the many gifts Jesus gives us. We'll look at some more of his gifts in the weeks to come. But *this* gift ... really, it is his most important gift: the gift of himself.

What does it mean that he gives us himself? It seems to me that it means two things.

First, it means that he gives us *who he really is*.

He doesn't give us who we might wish him to be. He doesn't give us a Christ that meets the expectations of a culture that lusts for relevance and hungers for spectacle and yearns for power, worldly power, the power of empire, the power of control, the power of coercion.

No he gives us himself, who he really is, his truest self.

And second, that he gives us himself means that he gives us *his very life*, freely offered up so we might live.

He gives us his life.

He is the giver and the gift.

He is the Shepherd and the Lamb.

He is the priest and the sacrifice.

Through his life, we are given life;

in his life, we have life;

by his life — his body and his blood — we are fed.

This is Jesus Christ's foremost gift: the gift of himself, his truest self, his very life.

My friends, may God give us the grace to receive this gift with gratitude and with joy.