

Good, Better, Best?
(1st Sunday in Lent)

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UMCG

The notion of wilderness varies from culture to culture. Here in the United States, TV serves up a variety of views of wilderness through various programs such as the Nature Channel and popular series like *Survivor* and *Man vs Wild*. Where I grew up in the bush in Mali, West Africa, the Bambara people have a distinct understanding of wilderness. Their world is divided between the village and surrounding farm fields, called the *dugu*—and the wilderness, the *kongo*, the geographical area stretching beyond those fields. Each geographical area is under the influence of different spirits. “Spirits of the village,” such as ancestral spirits and the village protector spirit, are largely benevolent. “Spirits of the wilderness,” however, are another matter entirely. At best, wilderness spirits can be capricious, at worst downright evil. Entering the wilderness can be a frightening venture as one could easily encounter malevolent spirits as well as poisonous snakes and wild animals like the lion, leopard and buffalo.

Throughout the Bible...both the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament...the wilderness also represents a place of great danger. In fact, in Mark’s story of Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness, we’re told that he was there for forty days, being tempted by Satan (the greatest of evil spirits). And he was also with the wild animals. But, as NT Scholar Audrey West points out, wilderness “is also a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God’s next move, a place of learning to trust in God’s mercy.”

In prior sermons, we have seen that Matthew is the most Jewish of all four Gospels. Its author (likely a former Rabbi or synagogue leader) wrote around 90 CE to a Jewish group of Jesus followers who had recently separated from Pharisaic (Rabbinic) Judaism. Matthew’s Jewish faith community was also opening themselves up to Gentiles. A major purpose of Matthew’s Gospel was to provide these Jewish followers of Jesus with a unique identity, distinct from Rabbinic Judaism. One way to solidify this new identity was to present Jesus as the new Moses, sent by God to save God’s people.

So, in prior messages we’ve pointed out that just as Moses received God’s commandments, God’s instruction on a mountain...so also, Jesus, the new Moses,

climbs a mountain and offers his instructions and laws that transcend the law of Moses. (Matthew 5)

Last week was Transfiguration Sunday, marking the transition between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent. We preached from Matthew 17 in which Jesus, on yet another mountain, is transfigured right before his disciples' very eyes. And two major figures from the Hebrew Bible join Jesus—Moses and Elijah. As we pointed out, Moses represents the Law. Elijah represents the Prophets. And Jesus represents the Gospel. And so the disciples have a choice. Whom will they follow? Listen to? The answer comes to them as God's voice speaks from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!" In other words, Jesus, the new Moses, is the Messiah, the Savior whose teachings transcend both the Law and the Prophets. So listen up! Listen to Jesus!

Ash Wednesday a few days ago marked the transition from Epiphany to Lent—a time of preparation for Jesus's death and resurrection. On this first Sunday in Lent, we read a story from Matthew implicitly comparing Jesus, the new Moses, with the Moses of old. The number 40 is highly symbolic. When Moses led God's people out of slavery in Egypt, we're told that he fasted for 40 days on Mt. Sinai, in the wilderness. Likewise, for 40 years Moses and his people wandered in the wilderness. Why? Because they disbelieved and disobeyed God. Today's Gospel lesson strategically depicts Jesus as "better than" both the Israelites and Moses. Jesus, the new Moses, passes 40 days of fasting and testing in the wilderness with flying colors, and comes out prepared to accomplish the ministry God has sent him to do: To be the Savior of all people and all of creation.

That's the historical and literary background to today's Gospel lesson. That's what the story meant back then. So now we must ask, "What does today's story mean for us...today?" As we enter the season of Lent. Today...as we face life's temptations, trials and tests? I'd like to focus on just one aspect of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. And that's the fact that the three temptations Jesus faced were not wrong—in and of themselves. In fact, one could look at them and say that each temptation was good. Think about that with me.

The first temptation concerns food. Bread. Jesus is famished after fasting for 40 days. And the tempter comes to him, and tries to hook him, tries to provoke him by saying, "IF you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread." But Jesus refuses! Feeding oneself is good. Feeding others is good...very good! In fact, later on, Jesus does indeed feed a mass of starving people in the wilderness. If feeding people is good, why doesn't Jesus give in to this temptation?

The second temptation concerns power - God's power to rescue people. The tempter takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, about nine stories high (90 feet). Again, trying to hook him, to provoke him, the tempter starts off saying, "If you are the Son of God...leap and let God rescue you. Certainly God has the power to do that." Displays of God's power to rescue people are good. Later on in Matthew's story Jesus does indeed demonstrate God's power to rescue people...on his own terms, not the tempter's. If displaying God's power is good, why doesn't Jesus give in to the tempter here?

The third temptation concerns what? Ruling the world. Taking over the role of the Roman Emperor. Having Jesus rule the world with righteousness and justice would certainly be good, in and of itself. So why doesn't Jesus give in to the tempter here as well?

NT Prof. Eugene Boring provides an answer as to why Jesus did not give into these three temptations, even though they involved things good in and of themselves. (2) He says that "instead of the bread, circuses and political power that 'kingdom' had previously meant, represented by the Roman Empire, in Matthew's Jesus we have an alternative vision of what the kingdom of God on earth might be. This is what was at stake in the temptation." Jesus came preaching and teaching the kingdom of God on earth, a kingdom radically different from the Roman Empire. To give in to the temptations offered him would have entailed Jesus abandoning God's mission for him in bringing in God's kingdom through his life, teachings, death and resurrection. Giving in to the "good" things offered him by the tempter would have kept Jesus from God's higher purpose, God's best for him.

The temptation to choose a lesser good because it is easier than pursuing a great good or that which is best is something we can all relate to. I recall going through a wilderness experience of my own many years ago.

After seminary, I experienced a crisis of faith while doing Ph.D. studies in Religion at Northwestern University. I honestly questioned God's existence and found it too painful to attend church—for three years! Instead, I watched a lot of the Chicago Bears (1985 season and following). I finally landed at the Libertyville United Methodist Church. After a year or so, the three pastors there (and several lay person) pressed me to follow my original call to ordained ministry. At first, I neither heeded their advice, much less God's call. Instead I cut a deal with God.

There were three vocations I was interested in doing at that time: marketing, teaching in a college, and working in the church. So I said, for the next two years I'm going to work hard at all three and then decide. So I got a part time job in the advertising/marketing department at Quill Corporation in Lincolnshire, and I taught part time in the Philosophy Dept at the College of Lake County. I also threw myself into the life and ministry of Libertyville UMC...filled the pulpit when asked, taught adult Sunday school, served on the Church & Society Committee, helped with Confirmation Classes and so on. At the end of those two years, I found that I did well at all three jobs. I could have settled on two very good vocations—marketing or teaching. Or, I could follow God's call for me...God's best...a call to ordained ministry...a call I first heard as a Sr. in H.S. while in Africa as an MK (missionary kid). So, instead of settling for the "good," I chose to jump in and follow God's call...God's best for me: ordained ministry. And I'm so glad I did.

Perhaps there are those here today who are settling for what's good in life, taking the easy way out and not opting for life's best...the meaning filled, purposeful life God has for you. I encourage you. Think about what you're doing with your life right now. Don't settle for what's good, or good enough in life. Don't even settle for what's better. Go for it...with God's grace and help. Go for the best! God's best! What will it be? The good? The better? The best? God's best?

Amen.

(1) Audrey West, *Preach This Week*, 2/10/2008, "Commentary on Matthew 4:1-11."

(2) Eugene Boring, Commentary on Matthew, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Nashville, TN, Abingdon, pp. 165, 166.