**Wilderness and Holiness**

**Text: Luke 4:1-2a**

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So I’m in the wilderness, hiking the Appalachian Trail; the AT. I’ve got the bare essentials in my backpack for a two week trek. And it’s going well. Until one night, when I hook-up my little one burner stove, and I realize that I’m almost out of fuel. This means trouble, because it’s not like there’s a corner store in the backwoods of Virginia. I’m maybe 3 days from a place where I can re-supply. Now, I can always build a fire. Except, I’ve never made a fire. When I was a kid, my dad and my brother always made the campfires. They never bothered to teach me and I never bothered to ask. So, how am I going to boil water to cook my freeze-dried stew?

Well, I had a theory about how to make a campfire. I’d watched Dad and Tom, so I knew in theory how to do it. And one of my seminary professors said, “There’s nothing more practical than a good theory.” So, armed with my theory, I set about making my campfire. I got my kindling and my middle stuff and my fuel, got some scrap paper, made my little teepee, lit a match – actually, several matches – and voila! One camp fire!! Cooked-up my stew, made a nice cup of tea, it was wonderful!

I was all alone in the wilderness. I could’ve gotten myself into big trouble. Except that I wasn’t really alone. I had my dad and my brother with me. I had my professor with me. I had the resources that God had so generously placed there in the wilderness with me. And surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses, I had nothing to fear.

I wasn’t alone in the wilderness. And neither was Jesus. The scripture says that “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit…was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.” It’s not like the Spirit led him to the wilderness and abandoned him. No, Jesus was “full of the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit was with him in the wilderness. Which is how he remained faithful to God and focused on his mission, despite all of the obstacles that were placed before him.

No, Jesus was not alone in the wilderness. He had the Holy Spirit with him. And he had all of those who participate in the life of the Spirit: the angels, and his ancestors in the faith, going all the way back to Abraham, and all who were praying for the coming of Messiah.

And, he had the devil with him. The devil, who was determined to pull Jesus off mission, off message, off course..

So, we’ve got our scene: the wilderness. And we’ve got our cast of characters: Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and the devil. And we’ve got a situation that’s fraught with both great potential and great danger.

Let’s look at how the devil tried to divert Jesus from his mission. And let’s consider how the devil might try to throw the Church off course. And let’s remind ourselves of the resources that God has given us to stay the course, as we make our way through the wilderness.

The first thing that the devil tries to do is to play upon Jesus’ weakness; which, in this case, manifests itself as hunger. The man is human; he’s got to eat. Indeed, Jesus was fully human. Fully divine, yes; but also, fully human. The man got hungry. But he’s chosen to fast during these 40 days of prayer; these 40 days of preparation for his ministry. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that draws our attention away from the superficial comfort of food to the foundational strength of the Spirit. But, yes, when we fast, we get hungry. So did Jesus. And the devil is trying to use that hunger to separate Jesus from the foundational strength – the Holy strength – that’s going to see him through in the long run. The devil is saying, “It’s all about you, Jesus. You have to take care of your needs. So use your considerable power to make yourself some food; and then enjoy it!”

But Jesus knew that he could endure some temporary discomfort in order to stay the course. He knew that the Spirit would give him the strength to do that. So he said, “One does not live by bread alone.” In the wilderness, especially when one is feeling weak, one must rely first and foremost upon the Spirit.

When appealing to weakness didn’t work, the devil reverted to lies. Lies, of course, are the devil’s stock in trade; he has been called the father of lies. And here’s the big fib that the devil told Jesus: “Authority over all the kingdoms of the world has been given to me.” That’s not just a big fig. That’s not just a whopper of a big fib. That’s a “liar, liar, pants on fire” whopper of a big fib! Because, you see, God has authority over all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil knows this. He’s just using this lie to appeal to Jesus’ desire for power. He’s lying in order to entice Jesus into using that power to serve the devil. And Jesus, of course, sees right through the lie. He says, “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only,” because Jesus knows that God is the ultimate Source of authority, and only God is worthy of worship.

Undaunted, the devil tries to tempt Jesus into making a spectacle of himself; he entices Jesus with self-glory. “Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, and the angels will bear you up, and everyone will be watching you and saying, ‘Isn’t that dude amazing?!’” But Jesus will have none of it. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test,” he says.

The devil knows that he’s been beat; at least for the time being. Score: Holy Spirit 3, devil 0. Thus endeth the first inning. But the game isn’t over. The devil is prepared to bide his time and look for another opportunity to pull Jesus off his mission.

You know what? There’s a sense in which we are out in the wilderness – the Church is out in the wilderness – and the devil is pulling the same stuff on us that he pulled on Jesus. We, too, are prone to appeals based on weakness and lies and the desire for glory. I mean, we’re out here in the wilderness of the 21st century, where mainstream churches go to die! And we’re scared. Of course we’re scared. Jesus was hungry and he was tempted to bail; we’re frightened and we’re tempted to bail. And in our fear, we – like Jesus – are tempted to hang on to what’s known and familiar and tangible. For Jesus, that was food. For us, it may be other things. When I was loading my backpack for my AT hike, I tried to put in twice the amount that it would hold. I wanted to be comfortable in the wilderness. Well, if you want comfort, you stay home. If you want to venture into the wilderness, if you want to pass through the wilderness to whatever it is that God has placed on the other side, you have to let go of all those comforts that might weigh you down, and you have to rely on the Spirit to see you through. No, we do not live by bread alone, but by “every word that proceeds from the mouth of God,” as Jesus says in a parallel passage (Matthew 4:4). In the wilderness, you have to leave behind what’s known and familiar, and rely on the Word and the Spirit and the power of God.

So, yes, out here in the wilderness, we’re weakened by fear, and we’re susceptible to lies. And the lies say, “If we could just restore the glory days, we’d be fine.” The lies say, “If we could just try harder at what we’re already doing, we’ll be fine.” These are the lies with which the devil tempts us.

And Jesus says, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32); and then there’s the coda: “Even if it makes you miserable in the short term.”

The Church in the wilderness is weakened by fear, susceptible to lies, and longing for glory. Some churches are tempted to draw attention to themselves by attracting big crowds and creating big budgets and building great edifices. “Isn’t that church amazing?!” We want people to say that about our church; most Christians do. Perhaps, especially, we preachers do.

The Church is out in the wilderness, being tempted like Jesus. But, like Jesus, we are not alone. We have resources with which we can stay the course in the wilderness; holy help as we seek to stay focused on the mission. Let me lift-up just two of those resources.

The first is the body of Christ; all of those other manifestations of the Church in southern Indiana with whom we share our mission. One thinks, for example, of the churches in Bedford and the way in which we’ve come together around the Men’s Warming Center. There are about 10 churches now that are working together on this shared mission. Running a ministry with our homeless neighbors with a focus on shelter and recovery and workforce development doesn’t seem overwhelming when you’ve got that kind of support. We are not alone.

So out here in the wilderness where mainstream churches go to die we have, first of all, the resource of the body of Christ. And we have, secondly and finally and most of all, the resource of the Holy Spirit. We are not alone. But we won’t know the fullness of this resource – we won’t know the fullness of the Spirit’s power – unless we, like Jesus, resist the temptation to feed on what’s known and familiar and tangible. We won’t know the fullness of the Spirit’s power until we rely on the Spirit alone to see us through. Because if we think we can survive on our own, we’re wrong. If we think we can survive by doing what we have been doing, but somehow doing it better, we’re wrong. Sometimes you have to let go of the familiar and head into the wilderness with only the bare essential of supplies in order to hear what the Spirit is saying to you, and discover the resources that the Spirit is making available to you. You don’t form your plan and then head into the wilderness; you head into the wilderness and there the Spirit reveals the plan.

Of course, you need a vision. That’s what gets you moving forward. But that’s all you need to get moving. I mean, scripture says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18). But I don’t know anywhere in scripture where it says, “Without a detailed strategic plan, the people will perish.” Sometimes it’s only in the wilderness that the plan emerges. Sometimes it’s only in the wilderness, when you’re desperate, that you translate your theory – your vision – into that concrete plan. Remember, I had a vision of how to build a campfire. I’d carried it around with me for years. But it was only in desperation, in the wilderness, that vision became concrete plan and concrete plan led to action. Sometimes you have to head into the wilderness before the Spirit will reveal the plan. Sometimes you find yourself making it up as you go along, according to the circumstances in which you find yourself; in so many spheres of life.

I mean, IU basketball coach Archie Miller may well have had a plan at the beginning of the season, but I’m sure that plan didn’t call for completely blowing the middle third of the season, and then finally getting your act together late and having an outside chance at making the NCAA Tournament. No, that wasn’t the plan. The real plan emerged as circumstances developed along the way.

Or how about parenting? How many of you parents and grandparents, before you had any kids, had a detailed plan about how you were going to raise your kids? Of course you didn’t. That’s not how things work. You had a vision; you had an idea of the values with which you wanted to raise your children, but you had to make-up the details of the plan as you went along. That’s the way it works in the real world. And that’s the way it works if you want to follow Jesus.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. And Jesus emerged from the wilderness with a plan. And he revealed that plan when he returned home to Nazareth, and stood-up in the synagogue, and said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring release to the captives.” Amen.