

First Sunday in Lent – March 1, 2020 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Genesis 2:15-17,3:1-7, Psalm 32, Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11

Temptation, who of us has not been tempted, little temptations the second brownie or putting off going to the gym and bigger temptations, around those things in life which we desire or fear. We were created with free will, but with that blessing comes desire and choice. Choosing between that which is lifegiving for us and for those around us and that which is death dealing. Choosing between that which is the long-term benefit and that which is the immediate gratification. And with choice we come full circle back to temptation. The opening of the whole Pandora's box of right and wrong, good and bad and the whole question of ethics and morals. Like it or not, God in God's wisdom created the world and us in this fashion. The serpent in the Garden tempted Eve and thus Adam to eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree. There is nothing more enticing than whatever I cannot have. By the time the apostle Paul writes to the church in Rome he is a mature and faithful Christian. Yet, Paul admits that those things which he does not want to do he does, and those things which he wishes to do he cannot. And in the 60's I think it was Flip Wilson who memorably said "The devil made me do it."

The story of Jesus being tempted by Satan has always seemed odd to me. Dare I say even seeming a bit abusive on God's part. Remember, Jesus has just been baptized by John and heard the voice of God. "This is my Son the Beloved in whom I am well pleased." Instead of being able to bask in approval, Jesus immediately is led by the Holy Spirit out into the wilderness to be tempted, or tested. The wilderness of Judea is not like the wilderness of the North Cascades. It is hot, there is no shade, there is little or no water and no food. All of the basic necessities for survival are lacking. The wilderness is the place of chaos, the place of struggle. The wilderness is also the place of concentration and focus. It is in the wilderness that nothing gets in the way of listening to God. It is why in the centuries that followed, the ascetic men and women of Egypt moved away from the distractions of the city and into the loneliness and isolation of the desert. They were seeking God and God's voice. Thinking more about the Gospel, I realized that I had missed an important part. In focusing on what there was not, I failed to focus on what was. In naming the real scarcity of the desert, I failed to notice the great abundance of God's presence. It was the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, that led Jesus into the wilderness. It was God who was well pleased that accompanied Jesus into this place of struggle, chaos, isolation and ultimately decision. And, God never left Jesus in the entire 40 days.

Jesus is fully human and fully divine. We understand or at least accept the divine, the Son of God, but it is harder to think of Jesus as human in the same way that we are human. It is harder to think of Jesus as facing the same temptations and struggles as we do. The prayer of consecration for Lent says it well. Jesus was tempted in every way as we areyet did not sin. Jesus was facing real temptations and it could have gone either way. In his encounter with Satan, it is Jesus' humanness that is tested. There are three challenges. The first, is to turn stone to bread. Jesus has been in the wilderness for 40 days and has been without food for all of that time. He was famished. It was real hunger. Creating bread from stones was something

Jesus could have done. The choice was to force God's hand and miraculously fill an immediate personal need, OR listen for the voice of God and to wait for God's time. It was a real choice. Jesus' answer, "...one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

The second challenge is one of ego. In throwing himself down from the top of the Temple and being miraculously saved by angels, Jesus is tempted to demonstrate that he is in control, important, successful. In this temptation, the focus shifts from God and God's way for the world to Jesus as the miracle worker. Instead Jesus redirects the attention to serving God. The third temptation is to power for seeming good. It is the temptation to a shortcut. What could be wrong with Jesus as ruler of the world. Then we could relax, no worries. On the surface it would seem to correct every ill with one stroke. Jesus rightly understands that this "fix" would not be lasting. For the world to change requires that God's servants be obedient to God's call and work to change hearts, transform lives and heal hurt one person at a time. The temptation to fill our own immediate needs at the expense of others, the temptation of ego and the temptation to put our plan for saving the world ahead of God's are very real human temptations. In ways large and small they are the temptations and tests we all face. It was only in facing these real and human temptations, that Jesus in all of his humanness was prepared for the mission to which God called him.

The Holy Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness of testing, also led him out of that wilderness and into the ministry to which God called him.

When the Holy Spirit leads, the Holy Spirit goes before and will not abandon. People of faith experience the wilderness of temptation, testing and choice just as Jesus did. The other side of that experience of wilderness and testing can be transformation, a new or renewed life. Often the transformation includes the discovery that we have found the work we were created to do, our vocation. Often, in following the Holy Spirit we find ourselves in places we could not have imagined ourselves being, doing things we would never have chosen on our own. And finding joy and blessing in doing so.

I have over several years become acquainted with Charles. Charles is a man in his 40's who has been seeking for some time to listen to the voice of God for direction in his life. It has been a wilderness time, a time of challenge and of struggle. Charles is a man of slight build, not much taller than I am, with sandy red hair and freckles. He is shy and speaks with a soft voice, not calling attention to himself. Charles has explored many directions in seeking his call, youth work, teaching, ordination among others. None of these, good as they were, were where God was calling. Charles persevered, prayed, did not give up. Last fall I saw Charles again. He had found his vocation and was collecting money to enable him to go to Uganda as a missionary, ...to work in the men's prison there. My breath was taken away. My first thought was God, "...what are you thinking?". It was a prayer. There were a whole list of human reasons why this would never work. I knew fear for Charles and what he might be facing. But, Charles knows that where the Holy Spirit leads the Holy Spirit does not abandon. By the

grace of God I said none of the things I was thinking, simply listened to Charles, and after prayer did support his mission. He is in Uganda, and has been there for two weeks. The adventure for Charles has begun. The Holy Spirit has led St. Augustine into the wilderness of transition, a time of decision, of testing, of anxiety. It is so because the Spirit leads not to a place of known, comfortable guaranteed results. Rather the Spirit leads to places of discovery, challenge, choice and ministry. The Spirit leads to the possibility of transformation the possibility of a transformed community. God has provided all that is needed for transformation. There are abundant resources given by those who have gone before. We have the leaders we need to find our vision and be transformed into the community of that vision. Our test in this wilderness time is to use what God has provided, confident that God will continue to provide in the future. Do we have the courage to follow the Holy Spirit's leading to the mission that God has in mind for St. Augustine? Will we be willing to risk saying yes when the road looks rocky, the way unclear? Will we trust that the Holy Spirit who goes before will not abandon but will go before to lead us out of the wilderness and into mission, ministry and new life in South Whidbey?

For St. Augustine, like Charles, the adventure had begun. It is time to follow the Holy Spirit out of the wilderness and into the light of mission.

After Jesus returned from the wilderness, his first action was to call disciples. He did it with little explanation of what lay ahead. The simple words of call were "Follow Me." Now, centuries later the words of Jesus to us are still the same. Follow me, follow me.