

Lent 1, March 5, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Matthew 4:1-11

I first met Sam in 1985. It was several years before he told me that in his past he had been a drug dealer. Not the “El Chapo,” drug cartel type, but a local “I can get you anything you want” type dealer. He’d gotten into it because he was a user, and it was a cheaper way to get the drugs he wanted. One day a deal went wrong and he found himself staring down the wrong end of what he described as “a rather large handgun.” He wasn’t hurt, but all his money and drugs were stolen. That moment was a turning point – he realized he was faced with a choice – He could go on living the way he had. He could escalate – get his own gun. Or he could try and leave it all behind him – leave, go somewhere else. He’d tried to leave it all behind him before; it hadn’t worked. What he did was go away. He didn’t know if he’d come back, but he needed ‘away time.’ And he did. And he came back.

Fast-forward from that decision to 1985 when I first met Sam. The person I just described - the drug dealer – wasn’t the person I met in 1985. In fact, had he not told me himself I wouldn’t have dreamed that the person he told me about was him. Sam was – and still is – a remarkable person– friendly and personable. He’s one of the most ethical people I know. He’s not a religious person, in the sense that he’s part of any faith community, but even if he hasn’t talked-the-religious-talk he sure has walked-the-walk that lies at the heart of all faith traditions. That’s a story about someone who repented, who came to a moment of choice and made one – to strike out in a different direction, to live in a new way, a more wholesome, fulfilling way.

If you read Matthew, Mark, and Luke they all have this wilderness story. Mark’s details are sparse, Matthew and Luke more expansive. The story is essentially the same. In Matthew’s Gospel, Chapters 1 & 2 have to do with Jesus’ family tree and his birth. Chapter 3 introduces John the Baptist and his proclamation, and describes Jesus’ baptism. And with Chapter 4 here we are: right after the baptism, in the wilderness. Jesus’ identity is revealed in his birth and baptism, which is also a commissioning. What’s probably out of chronological order is the death of John the Baptist. Almost certainly, it’s John’s death that triggers Jesus’ wilderness journey. .

Most scholars believe Jesus was a follower of John the Baptist, and the Peter, James, and John may well also have been followers. Jesus’ baptism is that moment when Jesus recognizes and accepts that he has been called by God to a particular ministry different than that of being a disciple of John. The Baptist’s death seals the deal. This is a crisis moment for Jesus, a turning point, a moment of choice. What should he do now? What is he called to do now?

We know the story that follows, or we think we do. He went out into the wilderness and 40 days later he came back, and in-between he was tempted. The story of Jesus’ human life is predicated on the fact that he came back. But he might not have come back. There’s evidence that John the Baptist – and quite possibly Jesus as a follower of John – spent some time with the reclusive “Essene community out in the wilderness – the place where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found is one such place – it’s definitely desert!

This is quite likely the sort of place Jesus went to – a retreat, if you will. And he might have gone there to decide if his calling was to be in the world, or to withdraw to it and stay with the Essenes.

The temptations we heard today are those of someone struggling to decide this very question: Should he do the expedient thing? Should he sacrifice the long-term for short-term gains? Should he meet the physical needs of others – and his own immediate physical need – for

food and turn stones to bread? Was his life to be an attempt to convince the world of the power of faith? Should he surrender the ends to the means and achieve world domination by a Divine coup? Should he take the power and control, should he become the puppet master? OR should he stay with the Essenes - a choice that would have made rejecting all of these things so much easier?

The reality of human existence is that the story of those temptations isn't restricted to one time and place; they are timeless – and aren't we living them now? Ends and means? Power and control? Big picture, small pictures? Smoke and mirrors? Doesn't it sound enticing to withdraw from the challenging world beyond the shores of this island?

The choices Sam faced are not that different than the ones Jesus faced and not that much different than the choices we face: what's the right thing to do? What's the ethical thing to do? Should I pull back? Won't that make the choice easier?

I've joked regarding my broken ankle that what happens in Vegas doesn't always stay in Vegas! Well, for Jesus what happens in the wilderness ultimately doesn't stay in the wilderness – the temptations, challenges, struggles he faced there were his constant companions, they keep on coming back in different forms. That's why, I believe, he kept going away “into a quiet place” throughout his active ministry – to remind himself of what he had committed to, and to seek renewed power to do it. And isn't that the truth for us, too? Rarely do the challenges we face and the decisions we make fall into the “once-for-all” category.

What does that say to us on this first Sunday of Lent?

- It says that Lent is an opportunity to “get away” from the ‘everydayness’ of our lives – if not physically then certainly metaphorically – to give us some space to reflect on how our lives are going and to seek renewed energy and insight as to how we might live more fully in wholesome, joyful ways.
- It says that Lent is a small reminder of the Gospel – the Good News about Jesus – that he has already gone ahead of us, even to the most forsaken wilderness places of our lives. Now no place in our hearts, in our lives, is so desolate, so distant, or so challenging that Jesus has not already been there; no test or temptation is so great that Jesus has not already overcome it.
- And it says that when those tests come back to us we have the strength offered by God through the Holy Spirit to face them.

Sam came back from his wilderness experience. And from time to time thereafter he would head off into the wilds – I think to check-in with himself and restore his own commitment to his reclaimed journey.

May this Lent be your wilderness experience, where you can check-in with yourself, reexamine how you're doing with the temptations our world throws at us – and, of course, come back!