

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 6 March 2022

God of signs and wonders, who speaks the world into being, speak again your words of life and death. May your word be ever near us, on our lips, and in our heart. Transform us as we hear your word this day, that we may respond with faithful praise. Amen.

Luke 4:1-13

The Temptation in the wilderness

Temptations in the bible are often reveal one's relationship with God or one's true identity. On the first Sunday of Lent, we see Jesus led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. The setting of the wilderness, a barren place that stands in complete contrast to Eden, is powerful. For Jesus, his identity as the Son of God is affirmed, followed by the beginning of his ministry. In the garden of Eden, the first couple reveals what their relationship with God is like through the temptation. As they came from dust, they have no life without the breath of God. After the Fall, their earthly life outside the garden of Eden is an ongoing learning process about God the source of life. It also tells us how we would respond to any temptations as a faith community.

The temptation of the man Christ Jesus

When we read Luke's passage, the first thing is the unusual combination of the words – temptation and the wilderness. Why would anyone be tempted in the wilderness where few things are around? Yet the barren desert is a good place to examine one's self, and the temptation is more about the man Christ Jesus – the Son of God. The threefold assault is especially upon the three parts of Christ's human nature – body, soul and Spirit – by the triple agencies of evil – the flesh, the world and the devil. The context of the temptation is also interesting.

The three moments of temptation have to do with the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. In Luke 3, Jesus is very publicly baptised, and the Spirit of God descends on him, affirming that he is God's Son. At the end of Luke 4, Jesus opens the book of Isaiah in a synagogue in Nazareth and uses the words from Isaiah 61 to announce the start of his ministry. Therefore, today's reading is 'in-between' - out in the desert, accompanied only by wild animals. Jesus can see nature and everything through the eyes of a human being. He feels the heat of the sun and the cold of night. And he knows hunger and thirst here and faces that testing. But what kind of

Son of God is he? In the ancient world, a son represents his father, and in the Old Testament, the king is sometimes called God's Son.¹ The Son of God represents God on earth, and he is obedient to God. But the three temptations have to do with earthly power and glory. To be a messiah of unequalled power on earth, the person can provide food in abundance, reign over the kingdoms of the world and be capable of demonstrating that he is so invincible that nothing can harm him, for God will protect him from all dangers. In each case, however, Jesus responds by quoting from Deuteronomy only to reveal the path of humble obedience. It is the path of trust in God over the security of meeting the world's expectations. This is the path that makes the work for the justice of God. By refusing to follow the temptations of the devil, Jesus remains faithful to his vocation, given to him at his baptism.

Temptations in scripture

Temptations often reveal hidden thoughts and desires embedded in people's hearts. The three temptations of Jesus are set in a wilderness, and they recall the testing of the people of Israel in the wilderness. The forty days of testing in the case of Jesus recalls the forty years of Israel's testing in the wilderness. Number 40 is significant in scriptures. In Genesis 7:4, it rained for forty days and forty nights as the punishment for the severe flood. Moses spent forty days and forty nights in the cloud on Mount Sinai fasting and pleading with God for the people² before the Law was revealed to him.³ Elijah spent forty days and forty nights walking to Mount Horeb to encounter God.⁴ As such the number 40 seems to symbolize the completion of the task, trials, or mission in the faith journey of God's people.

But there is a contrast between Israel and Jesus. Israel was not always faithful and therefore did not pass the testing satisfactorily. For the people of Israel, the wilderness was a complicated place. It was both a place of encounter with God and a place of testing of punishment of danger. In the wilderness, God met them in cloud and fire, and it was in the wilderness that God's Law was revealed. But it was also in the wilderness that they wandered for 40 years, and they hungered and thirsted; it was in the wilderness that they succumbed to the temptations of power and comfort and worshipped a golden calf instead of the God who had rescued them. Together with the number 40, temptations in the wilderness help us see what they had to encounter in

¹ Psalms 2:7; 89:26-27; 2 Samuel 7:14

² Deuteronomy 9:25

³ Exodus 24:18

⁴ 1Kings 19:8

the faith journey. Temptations helped the hidden desires surface from their hearts, and they had to seem their true selves. But it's not the end of the story. Even though they stumbled, they would stand at their feet again to finish the race towards God, the goal of the faith journey.

Temptations as a faith community

In our story time, we watched/listened to a children's version of the Temptation of Jesus. The question was – “what may have been the most difficult temptation for Jesus in your opinion?” For children (including us), the immediate temptation is hunger which we may wish to resolve as soon as possible. But the remaining two temptations are not alien to us either as temptations for power or an absolute security can come anytime. If we feel hungry as a faith community, what makes us hungry, and how do we wish to resolve it? What about power or security? Do we feel like journeying in the wilderness? Have we noticed our hidden desires surfaced? Questions may continue.

Lent is a time when we walk humbly with our God. Humbly, in the sense of trusting and depending on God. Through the wilderness tests, away from the eyes of the world and the security of control, we discover the hard road of humility and whether we are willing to take up the demands, it places on us. In the wilderness, our greatest vulnerabilities and needs are laid bare before God. For forty days, we will walk closer with God while trusting God in the wilderness; For forty days we will gaze at the stars and feel the ground beneath our feet as we connect with the wonder of creation. May God lead us through the wilderness and bring us to the Promised Land. May God guide us so that following the Son, we may walk safely through the wilderness of this world toward the life. We pray this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.