

Tempted in the Wilderness
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Matthew 4: 1-17

Years ago my family decided it would be fun to take our oldest child on one last camping trip before her younger brother was born. It was late August, kindergarten was about to begin, and Clark and I had both been working so hard. We thought a little family time together in the great outdoors would be the perfect way to reconnect.

We went to the camping gear store and got all that we thought we might need for the trip: a new tent, lanterns, bug spray, an air mattress. We loaded it all in the car and set out to make our way in the wilderness of Hammonasset State Park. When night fell, and it was time to go to bed, we crawled into the tent and tried to get some shut eye.

It's amazing to me now that I didn't anticipate how uncomfortable tent camping would be at the beginning of my third trimester. What a difficult night! I tossed and turned for the first few hours, then got up and paced in front of the tent. The moon was bright that night, so I put on my flip flops and made my way to the water's edge, where I spent the next few hours watching the tide roll out, thinking about how our lives would soon change.

I remember being nervous about becoming a mother for the second time around. One child is enough responsibility... but two? What if I didn't have enough time, love, energy to go around? And what about the finances, would we have enough to give them a good life?

I'm not sure why my worrying was so intense that night. Sometimes when we are in the middle of a life transition, our mind plays tricks on us – doubt creeps in like a foggy mist.

Jesus was about 27 years old when he went through his most intense wilderness moment. He had just been baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan River. On the heels of that intense experience, he felt a pull towards the desert, where he would live alone for 40 days in prayer and fasting.

Only, it turns out.... he wasn't alone. Not really.

We might call his wilderness companion... the Tester. In early scripture, he is an ally of God, one who tests Creation to determine its soundness. Think of the Tester like a cosmic building inspector who enforces the Universal Building Code.

You know about building code inspectors, don't you? They are the ones who enforce the guidelines so that no one will ever look at your house and use the words "creative" and "electrician" in the same sentence. That is good thing. But every contractor I know has encountered an inspector who is more nuisance than necessity.

Jesus has already been called Messiah and Emmanuel in Matthew's storytelling. We require plumbers and pediatricians to pass tests before we allow them to do their job, so it's no surprise that the Messiah would also be tested. You don't turn just anyone loose to hold a position like that before making sure they were up to the job.

His first test is to see if he is able to balance the two aspects of being human that are most often out of whack: aspiration and appetite. Jesus is given a chance to ease his hunger. After forty days of fasting, he is hungry and fasts are made to be broken. But he refuses the temptation.

Several years ago, a friend of mine had a daughter approaching her bat mitzvah. The girl was experimenting with how (and whether) she wanted to be Jewish and take on discipline of Torah observance, including dietary restrictions like not eating pork.

One day she asked her father what was wrong with pepperoni pizza. "If God created the earth and every creature on it," she argued, "what could be wrong with enjoying the taste of the pork that goes into the pepperoni?" Maybe she expected her father to issue a prohibition. Instead, he responded with a challenge: "You are becoming an adult, you will have to decide," he said. Then he held his breath.

A few weeks later, his daughter announced her decision. "There is nothing wrong with pepperoni pizza," she declared. "God made it, and there is nothing wrong with it." Parental nervousness began to boil. But she continued: "There is nothing wrong with pepperoni, but there is a lot that is right with learning self-control. When I smell pepperoni, I will remember that I am a Jew and that I know how to control myself."

Jesus is being given essentially, the same test. Both he and my friend's daughter pass.

Next Jesus is tested to see whether he will fall victim to the idea that being the Son of God makes him immune to the laws of nature. "Throw yourself down," says the Tester. "Gravity is no hindrance to the Messiah."

I had the opportunity to see the movie Selma this weekend (if you haven't seen it, make sure that you do!). The storyline is based on the 2 ½ weeks or so that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and members of the civil rights movement were trying to overturn the voting restrictions for African Americans in Selma, Alabama.

In one pivotal scene, King made a decision that almost cost him the support of his leaders. He decided, after leading a group across the bridge out of Selma, to not complete the march. Dr. King knew that the violence waiting for them from the whites on the other side would have dealt a devastating blow. Instead of subjecting his people to the violence of the aggressors, he delayed completing the march by a couple of days. This gave time for clergy and justice-minded people from all over the nation to come to Selma at his invitation and join them. In making that choice, Dr. King protected his people and the movement moved ahead. He knew it was the nature of the bullies to react with violence, and he wanted to keep the movement non-violent.

Jesus does not seem to believe that an exemption from the laws of nature is a proper way of moving forward either.

The final test examines Jesus' ability to refuse the lure of revenge. The real test here is whether or not Jesus, the survivor of genocide (Matthew 2), will leap at the opportunity to become emperor, to control the forces that killed his cousins and aunts, every toddler in Bethlehem and all who attempted to defend them.

Reading this part of the story is dangerous. If Jesus is being asked to surrender the hope of justice, then he fails the test. But it's more subtle than that. Humanity has a way of understanding retribution as God's mighty vengeance. Jesus pushes back that assumption, because he knew that God and Violence were all too often knit together in the people's minds and his kingdom was not about that.

We all struggle with the powers of this world. Sometimes it's easier to choose power, violence, and domination instead of the reconciling love of God. Jesus knows, it is easier to pick up lifeless stones and hurl them toward one another, instead of passing the bread that sustains life.

The rest of Matthew's gospel expands upon this final test. Can the hope that the world will be turned right-side-up balance itself against our aspiration for justice and our appetite for vengeance?

The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness and he depends on God's word at every turn. God is closest to us when we are tested, when we are outside our comfort zone, even though we don't think of it that way at first. It was his deep trust in God that got Jesus through his time of testing.

I think back to that camping trip I mentioned a moment ago and realize that it was a vulnerable time. The doubt in my heart that night probably would not have been remedied with a firmer air mattress. But I did feel, even in the midst of my restlessness, the deep peace of God. I pray that in your wilderness moments, you feel that too. Amen.