
Why would the Spirit take me there?

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A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
First Sunday of Lent
Matthew 4:1-11

I remember entering into Northside Hospital to start my chaplaincy training in the summer of 2003. I can hear the automatic doors opening and the rapid beating of my heart. The group of new recruits entered into an intensive day of orientation, which culminated in the issuing of our official hospital badges. As I looked at mine, with the designation, "Chaplain," I longed for some sort of disclaimer. Couldn't I at least get a trainee badge for the first few weeks? Was I really expected to jump into the deep end on the first day? Offer helpful counsel to unprepared victims who had no idea just how untrained I was? At least in a restaurant, you know when the person has just started their job.

After going through the administrative requirements, we each met with our supervisor to be told what floor we would have primary responsibility for in addition to our on call assignments. When I sat down in Gene's office, he began with, "I have decided to assign you to the cardiac floor. After reading your file, it seems to me that it might be helpful for you to be with Type A people like yourself, who suddenly find themselves side-lined."

It was a masterful assignment in many ways. I could indeed relate to the frustration of the patients. They suddenly found themselves in places of great vulnerability, which few of us enjoy. They were being confronted with their inability to control the situation, their doctors, and were looking into a rather uncomfortable mirror of their own mortality. And so was I.

As they struggled with things they could not do, I struggled with not being able to fix it for them. When they realized that major life changes were needed for a long and healthy life, I struggled with the fact that my background as a public policy analyst did not yield a translatable spreadsheet to offer.

Often it was not the actual physical pain of their conditions that was the most challenging. It was the loss of control that accompanied hospitalization. They did not know when the doctor would come to see them. They would not have the final word about when they would get to go home. They had to lie in bed for hours at a time without anything to "do." Their notions about productivity and efficiency had been turned on their heads and often this was a time of reevaluation for choices made. Decisions they had made about career were put into a different light as they realized anew the importance of their family relationships.

It was certainly a time of vulnerability for those of us trying to be chaplains as well. I found myself encountering people with the primary purpose of being present with them. I had to learn that sometimes saying nothing was the greatest gift I could give to someone. While there were things to "do" there were often no easy fixes. The fixes were handled by the medical staff. The chaplains were called into the more ambiguous spaces. Places of waiting rather than action. But as the summer went on, I realized that those places often contained the biggest opportunities for transformation.

It seems that we are invited into similar space in the Gospel of Matthew today. Jesus has just heard the same words we were reminded of last Sunday during the transfiguration. He is the Son of God, he is Beloved. I do not know why this still

continues to shock me every time I read it, but I am always taken aback by the next lines.

"After Jesus was baptized, he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."

There is little in our experience that desires to be in the wilderness, and it is even harder to imagine it is a space we have been led to by the Spirit. Why does the Spirit want us to be tempted? Is this some strange test to see whether we believe in the love we have been promised? Is our identity being challenged first thing to see whether we are worthy of the gift we have been given?

The only thing that makes some sense to me is that the Spirit is trying to make it clear from the beginning that Jesus' and our status as beloved children of God does not get us a pass on suffering. And it certainly doesn't give us a pass on temptation. So, I think the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness as an act of love. We are going to find ourselves in the wilderness regardless, so to go fully steeped in assurance of God's love, might be the best inoculation we have against temptation.

"Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished."

There is something powerful in being reminded of just how hungry Jesus was before he began his conversation with the devil. He does not meet the devil immediately upon entering the wilderness. The wilderness works on him for as long as Moses was up on Mt. Sinai. We don't know what the content of his prayers were during this time. I assume he was being strengthened, but not in the way I imagine strengthening. The fact that he emerges famished, reminds me that he has come in contact with his humanity in profound and challenging ways. Like someone suddenly in the hospital, there is a finitude that Jesus encounters that is in stark relief.

The conversation or scriptural debate that comes next is telling. It is perhaps one of the best examples we have a Jesus fully yielding to his humanity before Gethsemane. Because when you are starving, or I might say fully aware of your vulnerability, the temptations are everywhere. We indeed want something, anything that will stop the feeling.

When the devil tempts Jesus to create bread out of stones, I imagine the many things we look to to mask our vulnerability. The false nourishment of addiction or an unhealthy desire to halt the aging process at all costs. Binging our way through society in any number of destructive habits that the culture so readily offers. Each time we turn on the television, there are countless stones were are offered as the bread to quell our anxiety.

When I hear the devil tempting Jesus to throw himself off the temple, to deny his ability to die, I imagine the many ways we pretend that we can somehow avoid our morality. Whether it is through overwork, a false sense of control over our own destiny or a distancing of ourselves from those who do encounter their limits, I wonder how often I survey the scene below and want to believe I am God.

And when I hear the devil offer the final temptation, to replace trust in God with worship the worship of idolatry, I wonder how many golden calves I have spawned recently. When did I avoid worshiping God in service of a guarantee of power and control?

Of all the examples in scripture of the free gift of God becoming human, this is one of the most powerful. Because this is the situation that Jesus could so easily have said, I am the Son of God. I do not need to put up with the devil's challenges. I will bring my full divinity to bear and take care of this once and for all. But for Jesus to act as a superhero in this situation, misses the point. It misses the point that his willingness to embrace his limits is what will bring him into even closer relationship with his Father. Even in the midst of temptation and struggle, he has stayed grounded in the love of God. The one, who above all of us had the best case to make that he in fact was God, did not. How then can we, who so often slip into idolatry not hear a different invitation?

On Ash Wednesday many of us were marked with a visible sign of our own limits. I have reflected what I might want to do by way of discipline this season. I had originally committed to take on a discipline of exercise. The irony, was on Ash Wednesday, I couldn't meet my commitment because I was fighting a cold.

Ah, the limits again.

So, I still hope to take on this discipline. But rather than imagine this is a guarantee of greater strength as I approach Easter, I hope I will be open to the lessons of vulnerability it might offer me as well. The days I am not strong enough to do all that I think I should be able to do. The days that I find myself tempted to exert control instead of yielding myself into the care of God.

Because in the example of Jesus refusing to move away from his humanity we see something even more powerful than his demonstrating his divinity. We see the beauty of God responding to our limits in love. That is when the angels arrive. When we have the strength to not deny our weakness, God can be powerfully present.

And sometimes we have to get pretty hungry to really know our need.

Amen