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Road Trip! Great Journeys in the Bible VI. Off-Roading

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 NRSV Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7 Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, 9 and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Matthew 4:1-11 NRSV Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him."

So, there you are standing in line at King Soopers. And even though you picked what you thought was the shortest line, the person in front of you has three items with no tags on them, a bunch of coupons, some of which are expired, and wants to pay with a giant ziploc bag of change. And so you wait. You may fume a little. You might even sigh loudly and roll your eyes. But while you're waiting, it catches your eye – and even though you've vowed you'll never look at that so-called "newspaper" again – it's just so sleazy and silly – and certainly won't spend money buying an issue, it's just **so** tempting to take a peek. So you pick it up, and, almost as if you can't help yourself, you turn to the story whose headline says "*80 year old woman gives birth to extra-terrestrial*" or the one that says "*Statue of Elvis Found on Mars.*" **Temptation.**

Or you're sitting down to do that chore, that drudgery, that pain, that comes once a year; and you know that you must do it by April 15 unless you want to suffer *more pain* later. And you remember the money that you worked so hard to get and how stretched it could be sometimes and you think about the things that even though they're not deductions they **should** be! And you stare at that bottom line of that tax form and think: "No one will ever know if I deflate it a bit." **Temptation.**

Or, you haven't had one in years. But now at an after work Friday we-survived-the-week party, you are offered a can and you think "*Oh that looks so good; surely one little beer can't hurt.*" And yet you also remember that line that was hammered into your brain in all those meetings in all those church basements that you have gone to with all those good folks just like you with first names only, the line that goes "*One is too many, and ten thousand is never enough.*" **Temptation.**

Our scripture this morning also is a story about temptation – the temptation of Jesus before he begins his public ministry. It is the latest in our summer sermon series about great journeys in the Bible. And this journey is an off-road trip into the wilderness. The locale is fitting. Throughout the Bible "the wilderness" is often the place where people learn more of God, or get their heads on straight, or get clarity about something. The Hebrew people wandered forty years in the wilderness forgetting how to be slaves and learning instead how to be the people of God. Elijah's realization that God often comes in a "still, small voice" happens in the wilderness. It is a motif that artists have recurred to time and time again, from Henry David Thoreau retreating to the wilderness of Walden Pond, to the great naturalist John Muir – father of Yosemite Park – saying that wilderness is essential for the human spirit, to the soaring songs of John Denver. The wilderness – geographical or spiritual – is often the off-the-road place where we need to go before embarking on something momentous to get clarity about new directions to take in our lives. This morning's story of Jesus going into the

wilderness shares those motifs, for it is indeed a clarifying time and place for him before he sets out to do his preaching and teaching.

The story portrays an exchange between Satan and Jesus, where Jesus has a quick and ready answer for each of Satan's challenges to him. It's an intriguing story but I have to confess that on first blush you might wonder what exactly the story has to do with us: I don't know about you, but responding to temptation is never quite so easy for me, and words never seem to come quite so readily as they do for Jesus in this story. Even when I'm doing my best to say the right words, to respond the right way, sometimes my words seem totally ineffective. Have you had that experience? – that sometimes the right words just don't come like you want them to. And, moreover, these temptations offered to Jesus by Satan just seem so far removed from the ordinary temptations in your life or my life. How does Jesus' resolve not to turn stones into bread relate to my life or your life? What does it have to do with that tax form or that drink or those thousand other things that sometimes bedevil our lives, tempting us with their power? Well, let's look more closely at the story

The first temptation is this:

[Jesus] fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

What's going on here? Well, in a word, the temptation offered to Jesus was the temptation of **magic**. Be a magician. Magically eat and be full. And, oh my, there is an undeniable appeal to this, isn't there? In a world where children starve and too many people suffer and die so unnecessarily, the gift of magic can be so very tempting. In fact that is our very temptation: to think that God is just this sort of magician who can be persuaded somehow to do some amazing things to banish hurt and pain. But the problem with such a view is this: the temptation to see God as a magician comes with a

terrible price. Why? Well, a God of magic is not **moral**. A god of magic is one who might not act unless you offer the proper words, the proper prayers, the proper behavior. A god of magic decides that some stones will **not** become bread and that some children will starve. A god of magic is inconsistent and arbitrary. A god of magic is dependable only sometimes. And Jesus rejects this temptation, overwhelming as it can be sometimes, to think that this is what God is like. For a magic god would simply not be a good god.

The second temptation goes like this:

Then the devil took him... and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up.... Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

This second temptation offered to Jesus is, in a phrase, that of "religious sensationalism." And indeed that would have been a sight: imagine the sight of seeing a man standing at the top of the Manitou Incline or on the top of the Wells Fargo building and flinging himself off only to be gently wafted down by the hands of a fleet of angels. That would be sensational and spectacular indeed! You can imagine how a film with great CGI graphics would treat that scene. But the question the story raises for your life and mine is whether God is best thought of in these sort of sensational terms. We can too easily find ourselves thinking that God works **only** in sensationalistic terms, and not through, as it is put in the story of Elijah, "still small voices" or through the hands and voices and actions of other people. I am reminded of the old joke about the man who was stuck on the roof of his house during a terrible flood and who prayed "*Oh God, rescue me.*" Pretty soon a man came by in a rowboat. The man on the roof said, "*No, I'm fine; God will rescue me.*" Then overhead appeared a helicopter and a rope ladder flung down to him. And again the man said "*No, I'm fine; God will rescue me.*" And pretty soon the floodwaters covered his roof and carried him

away. And then he found himself in heaven and he asked God *"Why didn't you rescue me?"* And God replied, *"What?!? You silly fool! I sent you a man in a rowboat. I sent you a helicopter. I tried!"* Rowboats and helicopters are not sensational. But in this case they were folks who under the promptings of God were trying to do God's work and be God's hands. If we insist on a God who works only sensationally, then we will miss the everyday wonders of how God works through a voice, a touch, a hand, a meal, a cup of cool water, a hug, the ones whom I said last week – remembering Mr. Rogers' words – are the "helpers" who are there responding and thereby showing something of God.

And what of the final temptation?

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Who among us when we were little – or even now, sometimes! – hasn't played the game, *"If I were king..."*? You know, *"if I were king there would be no mildew"* or *"if I were king there would be no drivers who ever drove for miles with their turn signal blinking and who honked their horns as for no discernible reason"* or *"If I were king there would be no more wars or homelessness or terrorism."* And whether our kingly fantasies are trivial or profound, this sort of fantasy, this sort of temptation, can indeed be very attractive. Who wouldn't want to somehow force what is right to happen, when that could mean an end to war or injustice or famine or any of the terrible things that happen in the world? Who among us doesn't have our own imaginary list of laws which we would institute by fiat, if we were king, to make this world a better place. *"All these I will give to you..."* says the tempter. You can be in control of everything; you can **force** what is right to be so.

But Jesus doesn't give in to this temptation, and in his not doing so he again shows us something of what God is like. Jesus' actions here in the wilderness

foreshadow what his life, teachings, death and resurrection will show us: that God is a God of patient, persistent, persuasive love, not a God of force and compulsion. Now, we can get frustrated, if we're honest, with that. There are times that a God of patient love seems too puny in the face of human hurt and meanness and natural disaster. We can be tempted to trust in something else instead – politics or money or governments or force of arms or coercion instead of the God of patient love whose own son died on a cross. And yet, the truth is that when we are tempted in these ways, we forget that in the end such love is more moral, more good, and finally more effective than anything else that we are tempted to put our trust in. As the 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker said, and as we have seen a powerful example of this week, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Or, as a friend of mine puts this point, the message that we bear about the power of such patiently persistent love is indeed *“powerful because we are the bearers of meaning and mystery — which lasts long, long after money and medicine have failed”*¹ And couldn't we say the same thing about so many other things? – that the power of God's persistent and patient love will endure long after politics and power-plays have been forgotten.

All three of these temptation stories, then, are a sign to us about who God is and how we should think about God especially in the face of evil. They are reminders to us that our God is ever-moral, ever-loving. And so they offer us a choice – what shall we think about God and what kind of people shall we be? Let me tell a story: many years ago the University of Texas football team started its season under the leadership of a superb quarterback. But in the second game, the first-string quarterback was badly injured and the coach – a man by the name of Darrell Royal – was forced to use the second-string quarterback. Now everyone thought the team would go downhill – but it

¹ Dick Hamm, Presentation on Stewardship to the College of Regional Ministers (Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]), New Orleans, Louisiana, December 5, 1999

didn't. The team won that second game and went right on winning up until the last game of the season when the first-string quarterback had finally recovered. A reporter asked Coach Royal before that game if he was going to now use the first-string quarterback. And the coach's response was eloquent, if ungrammatical: "*Nope,*" he said, "*we're gonna dance with the one that brung us.*"

The temptation stories of Jesus are not in fact stories that are far removed from your life or mine; no, they are stories about our identity as Christians and about God's identity as God. About who we are and Whose we are. These stories answer the question – in the face of every temptation – about "*who brung us*"! Every single answer that Jesus gives to Satan in this story is a quotation from the book of Deuteronomy, whose centerpiece is the verse that Sue read: "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only God.*" God is the only source of strength and security that does not fail. God brought forth a people, gave them the teachings and the law, led them out of slavery, persisted with them when they went astray, and then sent a savior who grafted us and the whole of humanity onto that precious story through the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. And that is who we are and Whose we are. Let us never be tempted, then, to think or act otherwise. May it be so. Amen.