

WHAT A TEMPTATION!”
Mark 1:9-15 and Luke 4:1-13
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When my kids were growing up, they were always asking my wife and me to read them a wonderfully illustrated book called “*Where the Wild Things Are.*” It’s about a little boy who, in the dark of night, is confronted by the scariest, ugliest wildest creatures that one could ever imagine. As the story unfolds, he eventually challenges the beasts, stands up to them, and makes them his friends.

I don’t have to ponder why my children loved this book. It is about those dreaded figures that terrify children when the light is turned off and they are in bed and playthings in the room take on a weird and ominous form. To confront these nocturnal fears, stare them down and make them your friends: what a thrill for their young hearts!

Of course, most of us here today are adults. We are no longer tempted to scream when the lights are turned out and we lie there in the dark. We know that it’s not a ghost; it’s only our bathrobe hanging on the door. That’s not a beast crouching, ready to jump; it’s only our easy chair in the corner of the room.

Yet even adults know about **wild things**. Some of you remember a song called “Wild Thing.” Wildness isn’t limited to books! The Bible tells us that even Jesus had to confront wild things as he began his ministry. The Bible says that after his Baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness, and he was with the wild beasts, wild things.

Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, and from that we get the forty days of Lent, our time of spiritual preparation for Easter. Like Jesus, we are familiar with the wilderness. Oh, there aren’t any deserts close to Cleveland, but in the Bible the desert, or the wilderness, is a symbol for the struggles we face in life. The season of Lent lasts for forty days, but most of us spend far more than forty days each year in the wilderness. The truth is, most of us spend most of our lives there. The wilderness is the place where we get hungry and thirsty. The wilderness is the place where we feel alone in some way. We don’t have to be in a desert to be in the wilderness, to feel all alone. We can be lonely in the middle of a big city. We can be in the wilderness in our own homes. Perhaps we are searching for direction because we have lost our way. Perhaps we are hungry for something in our lives. We can, for example, be starved for companionship because of an empty marriage that needs restoration. We may have lost our purpose and direction in life. When we hear that Jesus is in the wilderness, we can relate, for we have been there, too. Some of us are there right now.

Now, when we are in the wilderness, we are tempted, as Jesus was, by the wild beasts that lurk there. Not lions and tigers and bears, but temptations that confront us when we are vulnerable. We usually think of temptation as the challenge to go off our diet or skip our

exercise class, just this once. We may think of more serious temptations, such as being unfaithful in our relationships. I have talked with more than one parishioner for whom Internet porn poses a huge temptation. That may not be your problem, but lest we be too quick to judge, we need to remember that **all of us are tempted** in some way. **Even Jesus was tempted.**

We have to turn to Matthew or Luke to find out the specific ways in which Jesus was tempted, because Mark in his customary brief way, just says that Jesus was “*in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan.*”(1:13) When I read about Jesus’ temptations: that he was tempted to turn stones into bread, that he was tempted to settle for less than the best, that he was tempted to be spectacular and draw attention to himself — I realize that these were not in and of themselves bad things. Many people in Jesus’ day lived in dire poverty. They literally didn’t know where their next meal was coming from. Last evening, I was part of a group that served food to the hungry at Broadway United Methodist Church. How they appreciated a hot meal on a cold winter night. But even though the folks ate well last night, I’m sure they are hungry again this morning. The people of Jesus’ day, as the people in our day, need more than just a good meal. The deepest hungers of the human hearts are spiritual, and only spiritual food can satisfy our cravings and our deepest yearnings.

Jesus knew he could not satisfy spiritual problems with material solutions. When will we learn that lesson? Too often we think that buying them something will take the place of the time and interest that our children or our spouses or our parents desire. Gifts are not bad things. But they are no substitute for the real thing.

The second temptation that came to Jesus, and the temptation that confronts each of us in the wilderness where we live our lives, where the wild things are, is the temptation to settle for less than the best. For Jesus it was the temptation to bow down and worship the devil — to give in to the world and its values rather than to strive for a higher standard.

A couple years ago, I was encouraged by some pastors to read Jim Collins’ best selling book, *Good to Great*. It is not a book about religion in the strict sense. It chronicles how eleven companies became world leaders in their fields. The first chapter identifies the temptation that faces me and I suspect faces you, the temptation to be satisfied with less than our best. “*Good is the enemy of great,*” says Collins.(1) Here at Church of the Saviour, when I look around, I see a growing children’s ministry, a thriving youth program, progress on our Habitat House, (we are one of the few churches in Cleveland to finance a whole house as a single congregation), our 90 X 90 program with more than 250 people involved, choirs and a variety of other programs. I can point to a church that is a leader in the denomination, the highest apportionment-paying church in the East Ohio Conference, supporting missionaries over and above our fair share, a church that is taking people on regularly scheduled mission work trips and doing a myriad of ministries in the greater Cleveland area, and I can indeed feel good about what we are doing as a congregation. But God is not satisfied with the status quo. God is calling us to more. God is always calling us to a deeper and fuller walk with him.

Then Jesus was confronted, as we are confronted, with the temptation to be spectacular, to appear larger than life. “Throw yourself down from the top of the temple, Jesus,” the devil whispers. “You won’t get hurt. God will take care of you. You’ll draw a huge crowd. Then you can tell all those people about God.” We are called to do great things, as I have already stated. But we may be tempted to greatness for all the wrong reasons. We may enjoy the spotlight, crave the notoriety, and yearn to bask in the spotlight of success. Doing something

spectacular may be a temptation, rather than seeking God's will and direction for our lives and for our future. When we feel that we are being asked to take a bold step forward in faith, we must always seek God's direction and God's guidance, rather than to try to fit God into what we want to do and the direction we want to go. I heard a great acronym recently that describes our problem: **EGO**. It means **edging God out**. Be careful that we do not let temptation **edge God out** of our lives.

Well, Jesus confronted the wild things and resisted the temptation to solve spiritual problems with material answers, to settle for less than the best, and to be spectacular, focusing on himself rather than God. After the devil had tempted him three times, the Bible says tells us the departed from him "*until an opportune time.*" The devil didn't leave Jesus for good. He just backed off until Jesus came to another vulnerable spot. Jesus never got beyond the tempter's attention. Do you think we will?

The devil came to the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus was tempted to abandon his mission of sacrificial love. Perhaps the tempter also came to Jesus on the cross, as he felt the life leaving his body. What was going through Jesus' mind as he hung on that cross, dying for your sins and mine?

In his book, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Nikos Kazantzakis speculates that Jesus was tempted to leave the cross, to go quietly into a small village, to get married, to have a family, and to live out his life as the gentle carpenter that he was. For writing this book, Kazantzakis was excommunicated from his church, and was never allowed to receive Holy Communion again. Yet all he suggested was what we say we believe: that Jesus was a man, and that he had thoughts and feelings such as any other man. To want to get married, have a family, live a quiet life in the country — these are not bad things. Jesus was not tempted to do bad things, but he was tempted, as we are, to have a good life rather than a great life, a life that demonstrated God's sacrificial love for all people. "*Good is the enemy of great.*"

God is calling us to put ourselves, our faith, our resources on the line for the advancement of God's kingdom. The temptation is to stay where it is comfortable. In a day when creature comforts loom so large, in a society where "it's all about me," we can **edge God out** without even realizing it.

The tempter will not leave us alone. But, then, thank God, neither will Jesus. Today's Gospel reminds us that Jesus has come, not only to be our friend, our comforter and our guide, but also to be our comrade in arms in those situations where we stand face-to-face and must go toe-to-toe with the enemy. When we confront the wild things, when we must walk in enemy territory – in the cancer ward, in the halls of injustice, in the valley of the shadow of death, in the places of hate and bigotry — know this: Jesus has invaded it before us. We do not walk in those places alone. Natalie Sleeth reminds us in the song that the Carol Choir sings, "*Everywhere I go, the Lord is near me, If I call upon Him, He will hear me. Never will I fear, for the Lord is near — everywhere I go. In the dark of night should things alarm me, Even in his sight, no ill may harm me, I will be of cheer for the Lord is near, everywhere I go.*" When we are in the wilderness, where the wild things are, when we are tempted to settle for what is good rather than to strive for what is great — remember that! "*Everywhere I go, the Lord is near!*"

Prayer: Dear God, help us not to settle for anything less than your will for our lives. When we are tempted, as Jesus was tempted, help us to remember that you are always by our side. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Note:

1. Collins, Jim. *Good to Great*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001. p. 1.