

“Your Demons And Mine”

- I. Introduction: What would it be like to follow Jesus into the wilderness? The Judean wilderness is stark and wild. Not unlike our Death Valley, the wilderness environment can be brutal. There are few living creatures for company, and, if one is not careful, one could lose one’s way, one’s sanity, or even one’s life. Yet that is where Jesus went in today’s readings, and that is where we are invited to go with him this morning. The wilderness story is found in all three Synoptic Gospels and is an important prelude to Jesus’ ministry. Have you ever wondered why Jesus couldn’t skip over this wilderness step and go right to the miracles and other good stuff? It would appear that the Holy Spirit had some lessons for Jesus to learn before he went public as he faced his own demons.

- II. We also need to face our demons. In his whimsical little book, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis works from the premise that each one of us is assigned a demon whose charge it is to draw us away from God. Since we are all so different, our demons have to study us closely and come to an understanding of the “weak spots” each of us has. They then work on these weaknesses in subtle yet often effective ways, driving us further away from God and God’s people. Although C. S. Lewis wrote this book in 1942, it rings true today. If you haven’t read it, I would encourage you to do so during Lent – you may well find yourself described somewhere in it!

The book describes how we can be drawn away from God in many ways. Some of us are drawn away by our sense of our own superiority, our accomplishments, and our special-ness. In an odd, counter-intuitive way, if this is our temptation it is our very success that has the potential to draw us away from God. We may feel that we have achieved our success through our own efforts and skill and therefore do not need God to guide us. Or we may lose sight of the fact that all that we are given comes from God’s generosity and neglect to thank God for God’s goodness to us. For others of us, our temptation may lie in our fears, our deep beliefs that we have never been good enough, never measured up to others. Our preoccupation with our fears and insecurities may crowd out the presence of God’s Holy Spirit in our souls. Whatever our particular spiritual weaknesses, it is imperative that we go into the wilderness with Jesus to learn how to identify and confront our demons. We can see that Jesus had to pre-

pare to use his extraordinary power to fulfill his mission rather than using it to bring great personal power and credit to himself. He would be tempted again and again to develop an inflated ego and use his power to set up an earthly kingdom. Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. He could have chosen to advance himself in this way. No doubt his encounters in the wilderness with his own demons helped him withstand the temptations that he confronted right up to the time of his death. We know how Jesus' confrontation with temptation ended. How great is our understanding of our own sources of temptation?

Let me tell you about one of the temptations that I know particularly well. I'll name it the "temptation of being right." This particular temptation is well known to thrive among clergy, university professors, and parents of teenagers. The temptation of right-ness works like this: usually we take something that we have learned along the way, often in school or in seminary, and we give it unequivocal power. We clergy, for example, can place a very high value on "right-ness" or "correctness." We may value correctness in some aspect of the liturgy, such as where or when to stand or kneel or whether the altar candles should be lit or unlit in a particular service, placing the importance of correctness in that aspect of the liturgy ahead of our worship and our relationships with other clergy or parishioners. We may go so far as to judge those who question or disagree with us and permit the conviction of our "right-ness" to undermine a loving relationship with them. When we succumb to this temptation, we put ourselves in the place of God. In our claims to know what is right, we begin to pass judgments on others when it is not ours to make such judgments. Many of us have found ourselves judged, sometimes harshly, because of the questions we have asked or because of our interest in doing something a different way, thereby challenging the "rightness" or "correctness" of the person in authority. It is often tempting for persons in authority to assert their right-ness or correctness even when it may be hurtful to others. Ironically, acting on our conviction that we are right may turn others away from God, rather than draw them closer to Him.

This week the clergy of this Diocese renewed our ordination vows. We do so once a year at the beginning of Lent. I was reminded personally of my need to make sure that I spend sufficient time with God alone, that I pray for you constantly and work very deliberately not to let being the Rector of this incredible parish make me feel that I am more important than I am. Each clergy person here has dedicated his or her life to serving Christ; we should never let our own sense of self-importance to become large and therefore diminish the Lord we serve. It stands to reason then that rather than putting a premium on rightness my focus and the focus of all clergy needs to be upon

humility. We are here with you, not because we deserve to be, but because God's grace has given us the wonderful gift being called to serve God with you here at Ascension.

I believe another temptation often found within the church is to credit our own plans and strategies for our successful programs and our growth. Despite our theological understanding that all things come from God, we are human. Therefore we can be quick to credit our clergy, our leadership, or individual parishioners for the good things we experience within our community. Several weeks ago we asked you to prayerfully consider increasing your pledge to respond to some urgent needs related to the repair of our facility and to our youth programming. Moved by the Holy Spirit, as of Saturday – yesterday -- 87 gifts or increased pledges have been made in respond to that urgent request – we are close to meeting our need. But as grateful as we can and must be to each other and to our leadership for identifying the urgency of these needs – we must not forget that those of us who have responded with gifts and increased pledges were able to do so by God's grace and because of God's generosity to us. God has blessed us greatly in your responses – and we must remember to give the thanks and the credit for these gifts to God.

III. Some closing thoughts. My temptations and your temptations may not be the same, and our temptations may change over time as our life circumstances evolve. My demons and your demons may have different work plans. The most important theme of today's Gospel is that whatever our particular demons are, we are called to name them and to deal with them head one. Psychotherapists will tell us that the very act of naming our challenges can go a long way toward overcoming them. After we, with God's help, name our own temptations, activities such as engaging in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, participating in Spiritual Direction, and committing to daily prayer and meditation upon Scripture can help us overcome them.

Jesus' wilderness experience teaches us that nothing, no nothing, can separate us from the love of God and that there is no temptation that we cannot master with the help of the Holy Spirit. In fact, as opposed to wearing us down, an experience in the wilderness can strengthen us. We may, like Christ, become famished and tired, but we will not be left alone. We can come out of our individual wilderness stronger, clearer in our focus, more confident, and more spiritually mature Christians. This Lent I encourage you to intentionally take on the temptations that are uniquely yours, name them, wrestle with them, and learn how they might be holding you back spiritually so that you can enter Holy Week and celebrate Easter with a more powerful sense of Christ's resurrection presence in your life. *Amen.*