

**“IF...”**

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Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

**Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,<sup>2</sup> where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” <sup>5</sup>Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” <sup>9</sup>Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ <sup>11</sup>and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” <sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” <sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.**

Notice that Jesus is “led by the Spirit” in the wilderness, “into” the wilderness says Matthew; and Mark, even more emphatically, “the Spirit *drove* [Jesus] out into the wilderness.” So if the Spirit is behind this, being tempted or perhaps better translated “tested” in the wilderness is not a bad thing by any means. Some good, practical advice if you’re “going through hell,” is to “keep moving” – by all means, don’t stop there. But when in a wilderness, trying to move too hastily move through it and back to the familiar ground might short-circuit some important spiritual growth that God intends for us. However uncomfortable, we would do better to linger there for a time, for a season – which is the Lenten invitation in large measure.

Check out the Bible: wildernesses have been places of significant spiritual growth for God’s people, for new situations where the familiar landmarks are absent prepare us to rely more on God and force us to learn new things, new ways. Any new or unfamiliar situation can be a wilderness...any uncharted territory we find ourselves invited or driven into. A friend of mine once commented upon the plight of students who arrive at Princeton Seminary from distant places to study. Princeton has a little 2-mile train shuttle that runs from the Princeton station to the main Amtrak line at Princeton Junction – fondly called “the Dinky.” So it must seem to newcomers in an unfamiliar town as though they’ve arrived on another planet, when told that to catch the train to New York, you “take the Dinky by the Wawa.” Even Princeton can be a wilderness to new arrivals.

For Jesus, his wilderness was his necessary season of vocational testing. He heard God’s voice at his baptism saying “You are my Son, the Beloved.” So he knew who he was; now to struggle with *what it means* to be God’s Son, the Christ, the Messiah. Each of the three movements of his testing catches that huge little word, “If...” How many possibilities hinge on that tiny two-letter word, how many oceans of regretful tears, how many “roads not taken?” Think of how many songs begin that way: “If I were a rich man...if I ruled the world...if you were the only girl in the world...if a picture paints a thousand words...if we could start over... if I had a hammer ... if

you're happy and you know it clap your hands...and you can think of scads more. What a powerful little word.

Here, at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, it becomes a word of testing: "*If* you are the Son of God..." "*If* you will worship me..." I think the word "testing" is better than "temptation" here because we always think of temptation as the possibility of being lured by some possibility that it obviously and certifiably bad. ("Great was the temptation to falsify her tax returns." "He was tempted but resisted taking advantage of a vulnerable customer.") But temptation is frequently more subtle and seductive than that. Jesus was famished and could have turned stones to bread; and if he could have done it for himself, why he could have been a messiah who feeds the bellies of so many of God's children who are malnourished or starving. What's wrong with that? And if Jesus would accept the devil's invitation to rule with authority over all the kingdoms of the world, why he could have been the most benevolent ruler of all, transforming the world into a kingdom of love, peace, and justice among all its peoples. What could be wrong with that? Don't the ends sometimes justify the means? And if Jesus were to leap from the pinnacle of the Temple and be borne safely down by God's angels – well, what a testimony to God's power, a stunning display that could really "Wow!" the crowds into belief. Anything wrong with these options?

Yes...yes...and yes. Because none of these possibilities were the vocation of God's Messiah, the suffering servant Lord, the Bread of Life, the crucified Messiah. As our Presbyterian Confession of 1967 has it: "We ascribe to God superlatives of power, wisdom, and goodness. But in Jesus Christ God reveals love by showing power in the form of a servant, wisdom in the folly of the cross, and goodness in receiving sinful people."<sup>i</sup> Jesus inverts the world's expectations and refuses to let the devils or the world's "if's" of testing set his course.

And that's where we can write ourselves into this wilderness testing story. We will never be tested vocationally as the Messiah, but our Reformed and Presbyterian understanding of vocation is that we are all called by God to a sacred vocation, a "calling" (same root word)...whatever our work, our employment may be, as long as it's lawful, honors all and harms no one. Johan Sebastian Bach signed each of his original musical scores with the letters S.D.G. for the Latin phrase *solī deo Gloria* – "to God alone be the glory." A proper understanding of calling or vocation would mean that whatever we do, design, create, maintain, enable - our work would be signed with our name and *solī deo Gloria*. Done for God's glory under the Lordship of Christ; that gives a sacred aspect to all work...

Not tested for the vocation of Messiah but, in Calvin's word, "in all of life's actions to look to [our] calling...in [our] particular way of life,"<sup>ii</sup> that is, in all the places temporary and long-term, where we are planted or through which we pass.

We too, like Jesus, are challenged to wrestle with our true calling amid the wilderness experiences of our life; these can come amid our work, our home, our community, our church...times when it is essential to discern which pathway, among the many options (and some of them good options), best reflects and witnesses to our vocation as children of God, disciples of Christ, Easter people, ministers of reconciliation, servants of others, prophets of truth. We will face testing on at least two fronts:

From the *world*, whose "if" will be something like: "If you want to succeed...if you want to get along... if you want to find acceptance... if you want to be rewarded... if you don't want to rock

the boat... if you want to be part of this outfit, community, club, corporation... And the test will suggest that there are very practical matters to consider that may sometimes require us to bend, compromise, forego, keep silence. Temper “for the glory of God alone” to “for the good of the organization.” I have the greatest respect for Christians who face these very difficult challenges in their workplace every day; there indeed is where the rubber meets the road in terms of living out one’s faith. And that is why we need the support of the whole faith community in meeting this kind of testing.

The other testing may be from conventional Christianity, a kind of undiscerning civil religion, whose “if” may be something like: “If you are a Christian, you surely don’t accept...approve...believe... associate with... get mixed up in... The issue here is that conventional Christianity so easily gets captured by the society, the culture in which it lives, that it can be suggested that to go against the currents of convention is to work against God, when it may well be the current that is flowing in the wrong direction with the blessing of popular religion. As we struggle, we need the collective wisdom of the church to clarify our calling, but when faith is too much captured by culture, our vocation may be marked by resisting, contending, transforming, and in the words of our Brief Statement of Faith, “unmasking idolatries in Church and culture.”

“If you are the Son of God...” “If you are a child of God and disciple of Christ...” The testing comes to us as to Jesus. Lent especially is a time to welcome such wilderness experiences as the time and place our faith may be strengthened, our identity confirmed, our way ahead made more clear. Since (not “if”) the Spirit is with us in our wilderness, we can bring with us a certain confidence that God will not leave us there. – though the devil will look for further opportune times in other wilderness sojourns. It is reported that the renowned frontiersman, Daniel Boone, was once asked if he had ever been lost in the wilderness. He thought for a moment and replied, “Nope – of course there were times I was slightly confused for 5 or 6 days.”

We may get slightly confused in our wilderness, but with the Spirit of Christ helping us to discern the way ahead, resist the dead end choices, and follow our particular calling as God’s child and Christ’s disciple, we can claim some of the Daniel Boone confidence: Confused? Maybe, for a while. Lost forever? No way! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Confession of 1967, 9.15

<sup>ii</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book Three, Chapter XVI, 4.