

March 5, 2017  
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7  
Matthew 4:1-11

Who is this... Son of God?

Today on our first Sunday in Lent, Jesus is in the wilderness. He is there, fasting and praying. And he has been there, in the wilderness for 40 days, and at the end of those 40 days, Jesus is tired and hungry and here comes the devil to tempt him. That's what you get for being the Son of God. You get led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit for a difficult, desperate experience. There is no holiday for Jesus. No spiritual retreat to a luxurious, four-star hotel before the work of ministry begins. It's the wilderness for the Son of God.

Jesus is in the wilderness, as so many Biblical figures have been before him. He is there waiting on God, waiting for what's next. Like Noah did, and Moses and Elijah, who waited their forty days for God. Like the people of Israel, waiting for the Promised Land for 40 years. Waiting, like us, maybe. Like those of us waiting in our own wildernesses.

Wondering and waiting for things to change, for things to get better.

Waiting to know which way to go. And who you are supposed to be and how you are supposed to be and where you are supposed to be. Do you

ever feel like that? That you are in the wilderness, in a difficult, desperate place, waiting for God?

If so, then you are in good company. Because many, many people have been there, including Jesus, who is in the wilderness today because God put him there. Because God led him there. Because the wilderness was where God wanted the Son of God to be, to help him understand who he was. And how he would be tempted at every turn. How he would be tempted over and over again to not be God's Son.

Jesus, the Son of God, is in the wilderness today. This is what you get for being the Son of God. Because only a few verses earlier in the gospel of Matthew it was announced publicly that that's who Jesus was. As he was baptized in the river Jordan, the heavens were opened and the Spirit descended and a voice from above proclaimed loud and clear. "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." What a magnificent, cosmic revelation to the world. "This is my Son, says God. This, here, this is my Son."

To be the Son of God in Jesus's day was a very powerful thing. In Egypt, the Son of God was the Pharaoh, who was worshiped as a divine

being. In Rome, the emperors were called, *divi filius*, son of a god.

Emperor Augustus who ruled until 14 AD, issued coins with *divi filius* printed on them. And Tiberius, the next emperor, also claimed the title, son of a god. And even in the Hebrew scriptures, a few very special people were called Son of God. Adam, was the original son of God. And King David was also called son of God, but no one would expect less from David, the anointed Messiah and King of Israel. To be Son of God was to be of God and from God and acting on God's behalf.

To be the Son of God was a powerful thing. It was to divinely command and to order the world. It was to be praised and adored as a sacred celebrity. It was to have the world at your fingertips, as you like, when you like. The Son of God could do that. And Jesus, according to our scripture reading is the Son of God, in his world of Egyptian deities and Greco-Roman god heroes and semi-divine kings. He is anointed by God. Introduced and authorized by God. This is without doubt God's heir apparent. Literally, entitled to everything, as God's beloved Son.

Being the Son of God was a powerful thing in Jesus' day. And power, of course, has many temptations. At the end of his difficult forty day fast,

Jesus was probably feeling pretty powerless. And alone. And hungry. And desperate. And he was probably very tempted to be that Son of God that the world expected. To use his privilege for himself. To elevate his own needs. To assert his will as God's will. "Go on, says the devil. Be powerful. Be mighty and amazing. Go on. Be in charge. Advance yourself. Use your position for yourself. Everyone knows that that's what the Son of God does. Might makes right. The ends justify the means. If you CAN do something, then you should. It doesn't matter if it is good or godly. You have the power. So use it, Son of God."

The devil comes to Jesus in the wilderness when he is utterly powerless. When Jesus could use his power for himself and force the world to serve him. And justify it as something he is doing for the Kingdom of God. And Jesus must decide, in that nowhere, nothing place, who he will be. Will he be a Son of God like the Egyptian royalty, demanding worship? Will he be a *divis filius*, like the Emperors of Rome, ruling by military might? Or will he be *deus Filius*, Son of God; Son of God the Creator, who made heaven and earth, who desires life, not power; who seeks to

love creation, not to BE loved by creation. Who comes to serve, not to BE served. Not to be God-over-us, but God-with-us.

Jesus is the Son of THAT God. But the temptation to be something else is always there. The devil is always there. And the Devil knows humanity. He knows the frailty that Jesus fully God and fully human has taken on. From the very beginning in Genesis, the devil has had humanity's number. Ever since Adam and Eve, the devil has known just what to say to throw us off course and make us forget we are children of God. "Come on," the devil says in the Garden of Eden. "Did God really say you shouldn't eat from any tree? Do you think God will be THAT upset if you did? Don't you think you deserve something special, since you are special to God, Adam and Eve? Since you are God's son and God's daughter, don't you think you are entitled to something?"

Power has many temptations. And because we can, we think we should. Because it sounds good, we think it is good. We humans are very easy to fool when it comes to privilege and self-interest. It is easy to get us to think only of what is best for us and what would make us better and bigger and faster and more popular, no matter the cost. If we are sons

and daughters of God, why not? Aren't we entitled? Aren't we entitled to our Garden of Eden?

“If you are the Son of God,” says the devil to Jesus, “turn these stones into bread. Go on. Use your divine power. Just try it out. See what you can do. There's no one here. No one will know. Make a few loaves of bread. You're hungry, Son of God. You deserve it, don't you think?”

But Jesus knows that's not what the Son of God does. The Son of God isn't here to use his power for himself. He is not the Son of God so he can feed himself. He is the Son of God so he can feed others. And later, we will feed the multitudes by turning a few loaves into a feast. Later he will feed his disciples at this table with his own body and his promise to be with them always whenever they break bread together. Jesus is the Son of God who uses his power to feed others, not himself.

But the devil persists, as the devil always does. “If you are the Son of God, why don't you prove it? Prove that you are special. Prove that if you jump from a high place, angels will catch you. Do it from this public spot on the temple, so everyone will see and everyone will be amazed and everyone will know that you are the Son of God and they will

worship you. Isn't that what you want?" But Jesus knows that's not what the Son of God does. He isn't here to prove anything. He doesn't need to display his might. Or impress people by showing off and doing magic tricks and miraculously escaping death. Instead he has come to tackle death head-on. Later, he will face the worst kind of death on a cross. And no angels to rescue him. And there will be no miraculous escape. Jesus is the Son of God who will suffer and die because that is what God does. For the sake of this creation. For the sake of love. For the sake of all the sons and daughters out there in the wilderness in the nowhere places with nothing. Jesus will go where there is no love and no hope and no life to be with us. Jesus will go to hell and back for us and nothing will stop him.

But the devil will not give up. "If you are the Son of God, then why don't you rule these great kingdoms? I'll give them to you if you worship me. I'll give you every nation. I'll give you every people. All the world will bow down to you and honor you and serve you, if you worship me. You will rule the world. Isn't that what you want?" But Jesus knows that's not what the Son of God does. He does not serve

anyone but God. And even though he has come to gather all people to himself and establish God's reign, he will not serve the devil's purposes of fear and violence. He will not be a Pharaoh or an emperor with crowds of people cheering him and bowing to his authority. Oh, he will have crowds. Later on, people will cheer and shout hosanna. But then they will turn on him. They will despise him. His own people will reject him. The leaders will curse him. The governors will condemn him. He will be abandoned by friends and feel forsaken by God. Jesus is the Son of God; but he will not seek glory. He will not seek privilege and power. He will seek the least and the last and the lost. He will not seek to be lifted up. He will seek to lift up those who are bowed down. He will give his privilege, his place, his grace to those who have none as the Son of God.

Jesus refuses the temptations of power. And we must too. We must not be tempted to want Jesus to be something else. To be powerful, to be popular, to be a ruler of the nations. That is not who the Son of God is. The Son of God serves. The Son of God obeys. The Son of God gives his life for the life of the world. Whether anyone is there to see it or not.

And so must we as the church. We must not seek our own self-interest. We must not cling to power or privilege. We must not serve the devil so we can have our own kingdom. We must be who we are, sons and daughters of God, who believe there is more to life. There is more to this world. Our God has more for us, even when we are in the wilderness. God has more for us than the devil can ever promise.

A few weeks ago, about 25 people gathered in our fellowship hall to talk about sponsoring a refugee family through Kentucky Refugee Ministries. There were folks from all over Woodford Co., from Midway and Versailles and Pisgah; there were Methodists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ. All ready to do something for their neighbors, neighbors they don't even know yet. And we talked about checklists. And responsibilities and things to be done. But the spirit of the group, the heart of it was not about who would get the most out of this. It was not about who would take credit or get recognition. It was not about any one church or any one person in particular. It was about serving God. It was about the love of God's Son that inspires us to love others. Not to put ourselves first, but to put others first. Because that is what is truly

powerful. Not fear or hatred or violence. But love, mercy, and self-sacrifice.

It is a powerful thing to be the Son of God. And the Son of God, Jesus Christ did not take advantage of that. He did not come to live an entitled life and to do what was best for himself. He came to do what was best for others. He came not to be served, but to serve. Not to be loved, but to love us, no matter what wilderness place we are in. That's who Jesus, the Son of God, is.