

“Feasting on the Word” – Stephanie Wing, 2.21.10

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all share an account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness as the jumping off point for his ministry. First Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, during which he is confirmed as God’s son and filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately following his baptism, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for a period of 40 days, at the end of which he is tempted by Satan.

For forty days Jesus ate nothing, and probably had very little to drink. He would have been weak in every way. I keep going back to the stories that come out of Haiti – of dramatic rescues weeks after the quake, and the images of weak, badly dehydrated, but still living individuals being pulled from the rubble. That helps us put a face on what prolonged hunger and thirst look like. Jesus’ face goes from being illuminated by the opening heavens at his baptism to the gaunt, hollow, and almost haunted look of a prolonged period in the wilderness with no food. It is when Jesus is at his weakest that the devil approaches with temptation.

Jesus was fully human, and like us, fully susceptible to weakness, fatigue, hunger, and temptation. After 40 days in the desert with no food, Satan sees a window of opportunity and jumps at it. Satan challenges Jesus to prove that he is God’s son. He sees that Jesus is hungry and tempts him with food. He sees Jesus’ weakness and tempts him with power. Jesus responds each time by quoting from Scripture, leaning fully on God’s word for support. Finally, Satan uses even God’s

word as a temptation, inviting Jesus to put God to the test. Again, Jesus resists this temptation, and the devil leaves him alone – for the time being.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews points out that Jesus was tempted in every way that we are, and therefore can empathize with us in our weaknesses. We experience temptations, and we also experience our time in the wilderness.

Following God does not shield us from wilderness. At times it means following Jesus into the wilderness. The Holy Spirit led Jesus there, and this was the place of final preparation for his ministry. The season of Lent invites us into the wilderness, not to prove ourselves by resisting temptation, but to place our focus and our attention completely on God. Lent invites us to be intentional, to remove the daily obstacles that keep us from abiding in God, and to free ourselves from those distractions and temptations that steal our focus away from God.

Lent invites us to prepare ourselves to be more receptive to God's presence in our lives. It might involve giving something up, but more importantly Lent should entail giving ourselves over completely to God. One of the best ways we can be receptive to God, to keep our focus on God as our provider and our sustainer, is by studying and meditating on God's word.

Both our readings today remind us of the vital importance of meditating on God's word. Our reading from Romans says that the word is on our lips and in our hearts. It is part of who we are as God's creation. When Satan tempts Jesus to turn the stones to bread, Jesus responds by quoting from Scripture, saying, "It is

written, one does not live on bread alone.” The full verse from Deuteronomy continues, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” The importance of the word of God is so central in these two passages. In fact, in the short 4 ½ verses from Romans, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Joel.¹ In our passage from Luke, we have quotes directly from Deuteronomy and the book of Psalms.²

Jesus had clearly studied the Hebrew Scriptures in great depth. He lived them and breathed them. Jesus, who according to the Gospel of John is the Word of God, with God from the beginning, also meditates on the word of God. This is what sustains him in the wilderness, and throughout his ministry. At the end of 40 days of hunger and solitude, Jesus draws the strength that he needs from the word of God, not from his own strength. It is in the greatest wilderness moments of our lives that we are at a loss for words, and at a loss for answers. But in these times, we too, can draw strength from the word of God.

Is Scripture still important to us today? We talk about Biblical literacy, and lament a loss of Biblical literacy in our churches. It is important for us to know the Scriptures to know who we are, where we came from, and how God has been interacting with all of creation from the beginning of time. It is important to know

¹ Deut 30:14, Isaiah 28:16, Joel 2:32

² Deut. 8:3, Deut. 6:13, Psalm 91:11-12, Deut. 6:16.

the stories, the characters, and the basic chronology and content. But even that isn't enough.

After all, we see that even Satan knows Scripture and can use it for his own devices. He quotes from Psalm 91 in the third temptation. Horrible atrocities have been justified for millennia with quotations from Scripture. Responsible Biblical study does not look for the specific verses to prove what we believe is the truth; rather, it is being open to receiving the truth by looking at the whole of Scripture. We Presbyterians don't often go around quoting memory verses to back up what we believe. In fact, we don't often memorize particular verses. We say that we look to the whole body of Scripture to listen for God's word, and that is important. We focus less on individual interpretation and more on how the Holy Spirit illuminates our understanding in community. That is also important. But really, how central to our daily lives is God's word?

I used to lead discernment discussions for high school and college youth at Montreat Conference Center, and I talked about discernment as listening for God's voice. Let's say that you had an important question or concern in your life, and you wanted some guidance from someone you loved and trusted. Maybe you would call your best friend, or your brother or sister, or perhaps your mom or dad, and tell them all about the situation. If you want to hear what they have to say, you aren't going to hang up the phone once you finish your story, are you? You have to keep the line open in order to hear what they have to say to you.

So if we want to know what God is saying to us today, how God is guiding us in our lives, then how are we staying connected? How are we keeping the lines of communication open? Ideally we do this in many ways – through worship, Bible study, and prayer – both in the gathered community of believers and also individually throughout the week. If we aren't reading, studying, and meditating on God's word, how will we know how God is speaking to us today?

Whether you are currently in a place of personal wilderness or you are sailing easily through calm seas, the word of God is the compass that you need. Paul reminds us that all who believe in God will not be put to shame, and that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Sometimes our calling on the name of the Lord takes the form of joyful praise, or a confident confession that Jesus is Lord. At other times, our calls are cries of pain or desperation, and we call out to God not in confidence, but in doubt. If we seek to be grounded in God's word, and if we continually call on the name of the Lord as our guide and guardian, then we will find strength to help in times of need.

I don't know what your regular practices are in terms of reading the Bible, but I invite all of us to increase the time we spend individually in prayer and Bible reading and meditation, especially in this season of Lent. There are many ways to do this. You can pick a book of the Bible to read through during this season, perhaps reading a little bit each day. You can follow the daily lectionary readings, which include readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, Epistles, and Gospels. If

you already use a daily devotional book, you can re-read the Scripture passage throughout the day, or even read it from your Bible, expanding the passage that you read. You can re-read the passages that we use in church on Sunday, taking more time to meditate on them and listen for how they might be speaking to your life today. Or you can look ahead to the coming Sunday's lectionary readings, which are listed in the bulletin or monthly newsletter.

Find a time and place that works for you. Maybe it is first thing in the morning, last thing at night, or during your lunch hour. You might choose to keep a journal, where you can write down your thoughts, questions, or anything else that comes to mind. If you can't quiet your mind from the concerns of the day, keep a notepad handy, and if something comes creeping into your head to crowd out your meditation, write it down to get back to later. You might even choose to write a verse or a passage on an index card, and to carry it with you throughout the day.

As we enter into this season of Lent, we seek to follow Jesus more intentionally. Following Jesus sometimes leads us into the wilderness, where we are tested and prepared by God for ministry in this world. It isn't a comfortable place to be, but there, in the wilderness we come to rely more and more on God as the source of our strength. In the stillness of the wilderness, we quiet ourselves to hear God's voice. If we aren't meditating on God's word, how will we know how God is speaking to us today? Let us ground ourselves with a firm foundation. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.