

## Wesley United Methodist Church

March 5, 2017

“Passing the Test.”

Matthew 4:1-11

Back in the 1920s, residents of Cades Cove, Tennessee, lived in fear of the legendary Wampus Cat. A creature known to be vicious, supernaturally strong, and sly. The Wampus Cat was so sly that no one had actually seen one, but there were those who swore that it existed. One loud shotgun blast echoing through the Cove would warn the men of the town that the Wampus Cat had been sighted, and they'd all grab their guns and go out hunting it. Only after the legend of the Wampus Cat was passed down through many generations did the old-timers finally confess: the legend had been started as a hoax. It was a way for the men-folk of Cades Cove to circumvent Prohibition. When someone came across an especially good batch of moonshine, he would shoot one time in the air. This was the signal to the other men of the town to come and share in the liquor. Every man who heard the shot would grab his gun and claim it was his duty to go hunt the Wampus Cat. The men of Cades Cove knew how to deal with temptation. They organized it.

You've noticed by now that our subject for this morning is temptation. Each of us at one time or another has been tempted. Even Jesus was tempted. Our Scripture for the first Sunday in Lent begins, “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Jesus knew who was tempting him. When we are tempted, it is important to realize the source of that temptation. God is not tempting us to do wrong. Jesus is not enticing us to sin, and the Spirit is not guiding us into temptation. Temptation never comes from God. I say that because it never fails to amaze me how people can rationalize temptation. They even credit it to God. They are fooling only themselves. Let's consider the nature of the temptations Jesus faced and see if they apply to our lives...

First of all, there was the temptation to turn stones into bread. The devil knew Jesus was famished after fasting for forty days. “If you are the Son of God,” the devil said, “command these stones to become loaves of bread.” People who have visited the desert where Jesus was tempted report that small rocks cover the ground. The small rocks might look like bread to someone who has gone forty days without food.

There is no question that Jesus could have turned stones into bread. But Jesus knew who was tempting him and why. Jesus quoted scripture in response to the devil's challenge. “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus is saying that there is more to life than having a full stomach. One of the great temptations we face is the temptation to always have more. Happiness is just around the corner if only we have more things, or more wealth, or the finer things of life. This is the message our society bombards us with.

Jesus overcame his first temptation by putting his complete trust in God. That's a good example for us. We're so concerned about “having it all.” The wise person trusts that God will provide all that he or she needs.

Just as soon as Jesus refused the devil's temptation to turn stone into bread, he was tempted again. This time the devil took him to the “pinnacle of the temple.” Again the devil says to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God...,” as if there was some question of Jesus' identity. The devil wanted Jesus to throw himself off the temple. To make the temptation even more appealing, the devil quotes scripture: “He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” Jesus once again countered the devil's temptation by quoting scripture, “It is written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Of course, Jesus could have leaped from the temple and angels would have rescued him. And he would have won an instant following. People from all over would want him to jump from the temple again and again. Pretty soon, though, they would get tired of seeing him jump from the temple and would want him to jump from higher places. Jesus resisted the devil's second temptation because he knew that faith could not be built upon the sensational. With his jump, he would have gained a large following. But the people who would follow Jesus because he could leap from high places were not the type of people Jesus wanted. They would ooh and aah, but they would not be the kind of people who would advance God's kingdom. God is not found in the sensational, but in his everyday faithfulness.

Jesus resisted the devil's second temptation, but the devil confronted him with a third. The devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and promised, "All these I will give, if you will bow down and worship me."

All Jesus had to do at this point was compromise his mission and his ministry. The devil was handing Jesus the whole world if only he would worship him. If Jesus would have given in to this temptation, he could bypass his suffering and death on the cross. This would be a short cut for Jesus, and it would be much more pleasant since it involved no pain. Jesus could have the whole world without having to suffer and die for it. What a temptation! Jesus, though would not compromise. Again, he quoted scripture, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

Quite a few years ago a news story came out of Russia that is a challenge to each of us. One Sunday at a house church, believers arrived inconspicuously in small groups throughout the day so as not to arouse the suspicion of KGB informers. By dusk they were all safely inside, windows closed and doors locked. They began singing hymns quietly but with deep emotion. Suddenly, the door was pushed open and in walked two soldiers with loaded automatic weapons. One shouted, "All right, everybody line up against the wall. If you wish to renounce your commitment to Jesus Christ, leave now!" Two or three quickly left, then another. After a few seconds, a few more. "This is your last chance. Either turn against your faith in Christ, or stay and suffer the consequences." Another left. No one else moved. Parents with small children trembling beside them looked down, but didn't move. They fully expected to be gunned down or imprisoned.

After a few more moments of complete silence, the other soldier closed the door, locked back at those who stood against the wall and said, "Keep your hands up, but this time in praise to our Lord Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters. We, too, are Christians. We were sent to another house several weeks ago to arrest a group of believers..." The other soldier interrupted, "...but instead, we were converted! We have learned by experience, however, that unless people are willing to die for their faith, they cannot be fully trusted."

There is no compromise in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus resisted the devil's third temptation. Jesus said, "Away from me, Satan!"

Three temptations: to use his gifts for his own selfish purposes, to base his witness on the sensational, to compromise his ministry and mission. It occurs to me that these are the most enticing temptations that any church faces as well. We could use our gifts for our own satisfaction. Some churches never get beyond that. We could make our service a sideshow and seek to win people with superficial witness to the Good News. We could compromise our ministry and our mission. But we are the church of Jesus Christ. He resists those temptations, and so shall we.

After being tempted by the devil, Jesus was ready for his ministry. His time in the wilderness was a time of testing. "Then the devil left him and angels came and attended him." Amen.