“From River to Wilderness”

Matthew 4:1-17

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This morning we will hear about Jesus’ fasting for 40 days in the wilderness followed by temptation. This story is usually read at the beginning of Lent – the 40 days of fasting and prayer before Easter. But, the narrative lectionary that we are following prefers the chronological order of events in Scripture. We are working our way through Matthew from start to finish. Last week we saw Jesus baptized in the Jordan River. The next scene takes us from the River to Wilderness. We see what happens now that Jesus is officially initiated into his ministry. Let us continue to listen for the word of God…

I once heard a soldier describe his journey into the army. He said that when he graduated from high school and turned 18 and was ready to take on the world. Graduation was a rite of passage, his long awaited baptism into adulthood. After 13 years of feeling stifled by school, he yearned for freedom. He wanted autonomy. He was ready to be unleashed from the restraints of the classroom and ready for adulthood. On the afternoon of his graduation, he went straight to the army recruiter’s office. He couldn’t think of a better way to live into his newfound adulthood, than signing up for the army and serving his country. His patriotism ran deep and he was certain that this was his destiny.

He said goodbye to his very proud family and hopped on the bus. This was it, he thought. My life is now going to begin. I’m an adult and have made this decision for myself. No doubt he beamed with joy as he journeyed to his next destination. But like many new recruits, the shininess of his situation wore off quickly as he found himself in the throes of basic training. The appeal of the army got lost in the thousands of pushups he had to perform and the hours of standing in the rain in full gear. He and his fellow soldiers were tested to their limits, pushed beyond what they thought they could handle. Their endurance and strength was put to on trial. He had moments of doubt, questioning if this was really the right decision. He said he found himself longing for the classroom, where at least a bell at the end of the day would offer him a reprieve. At basic training, there was no escape. He was constantly watched and tested. There were moments when he wanted to give up and go home. He feared he wasn’t cut out to be a soldier.

But at the end of those ten weeks, he was transformed. Stronger than he was before and more capable of handling the battles ahead of him. He realized that although that training was the hardest thing he’d ever endured, it was worth it. He felt like a more complete person, now knowing a bit of what he could accomplish. He turned toward active duty with newfound confidence. Ready to take on whatever challenges lay before him.

Jesus faced his own basic training out in the wilderness. Before he has dried the waters of baptism from his clothes, he journeys out further into the wilderness to face evil head on. For 40 days he fasts and prays in solitude. He spends time in complete devotion to God, preparing for the years of ministry ahead of him. When he is famished with hunger, the devil shows up. Three temptations are laid out. Placed before him are the lures of power, control and escape.

Each of these temptations mimic times in history, when God’s people had been tempted. There was Adam and Eve in the garden, tempted with the knowledge of good and evil. There were the Israelites in the wilderness, tempted by idols and food from sources other than God. With each of these temptations, the People of God failed. The fell for the trap. They fell into the chasm of sin. Limited by their humanity, they gave in to temptation. There is a long history of failure by children of God. They were too weak to stand up to the task. Too human to resist the urge.

We are among those who fail to pass the test. Not much has changed. We stand in this long line of people who don’t quite measure up. We are faced with trials and temptations on a daily basis. You might say that our time in the wilderness or time in basic training lasts a lifetime. All of our days are filled with trials. Each morning we wake up and before we put our feet on the floor, the temptations start to flood in. For me, one temptation is hit the snooze button, which I know will annoy my husband, but I am lured by that promise of an extra 9 minutes of sleep. I have to weigh the price of agitating my loved one, or just getting out of bed and starting my day when I should.

The rest of the day is filled with perhaps more temptations than we can count. We’re tested with how we spend our time. How we spend our money. How we treat other people. The trials are never ending and we find ourselves going through one long boot camp. Hopefully we get stronger each day. Hopefully we learn from our mistakes and strive to do better the next day. Hopefully our faith stands more firm with each day that passes. Each day we’re given a chance to get it right.

If only we could go back to the day of our baptism. That one perfect moment where we were presented before God and our community. Vows were spoken, promises made to live a holy and faithful life. Water was poured and grace was abundant. But like Jesus, as soon as we step away from the baptismal font, we journey into the wilderness were our trials begin. We face the reality that we are still broken people. Still very much flawed versions of what God intends for us to be. Still falling daily.

The thing is, in baptism we are claimed by God, but we don’t become God.

Coming out of those waters we are transformed. We are brought into new life in the new covenant. But we are not made perfect like God is perfect. We are not rescued from the reality of sin and imperfection. We still remain broken humans.

Rather than feeling downtrodden by this, there is hope. In Jesus Christ, we see the perfection of humanity in the most profound way. He is the one and only person who walked this earth without sin. He’s the only one who was able to resist all temptation – both in the wilderness and the many temptations that would follow. His ministry was filled with trials on a daily basis. The ultimate trial taking place on the cross where he could have escaped. He could have saved himself from that suffering and humiliation. But he stayed. He remained on that cross, proving his fidelity and faith to God. Embodying that sacrificial love that God has for each one of us.

When the devil tempted Jesus, he said “IF you are the Son of God… do these things”. Prove that you are the one whom God sent. By resisting the urge to obtain power and control, Jesus proves that he is indeed THE son of God. Not just a Son of God. Not any old child of God. Not one of those flawed people who failed tests throughout history. Those whom we read about in the Old Testament. No, this guy is THE Son of God. The very perfect model of what God intended for humanity. The flawless image that was created before the Fall in the Garden of Eden. Before sin entered our world.

Jesus offers the image of perfection that we all strive for. He embodies the authentic version of humanity that we are all supposed to have, but lost when sin entered the world. It is in his flawless humanity that we are saved. He is the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith. The one sent to take on all the sins of the world. And it is through him that we find ourselves reconciled to God.

We can take comfort in knowing we don’t have to be perfect because Jesus Christ is perfect on our behalf. He is the one who brings reconciliation and salvation to the world. Repairing our brokenness. Restoring us to right relationship with God.

This is good news for us. It means we don’t have to be perfect. It means to don’t have to achieve that impossible status of being sinless. And it means our lifetime of basic training is made a little less daunting. All because Jesus Christ came to be at one with us, living a life of perfection and being totally faithful to God. Because of this, we trust that although we’ll never reach perfection in this life, we don’t have to. Because Jesus is perfect on our behalf. Thanks be to God. Let us pray…